Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
6
limited
(II)
Magical Girl
Raising Project

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Magical Girl
Raising Project
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(II)

CAPTAIN GRACE

Can summon a really cool magic pirate ship.

FUNNY TRICK

Can swap a hidden thing with another hidden thing.

WEDDIN

If you make a promise, she can make sure you keep it.

RAIN POW

Can materialize rainbow bridges.

POSTARIE

Can send any item back to its owner.

KURU-KURU HIME

Can control many ribbons.

TEPSEKEMEI

Can become one with the wind to go anywhere.

MANA

Uses spells and ceremonies to perform various magics.

HANA GEKOKUJOU

Can make senses incredibly sharp.

7753

Uses magic goggles that tell her all about her targets.

RIPPLE

Can throw shuriken that always hit their target.

ARCHFIEND PAM

Uses her four large black wings to fight.

PYTHIE FREDERICA

Can reflect whoever she wants in her crystal ball.

TOT POP

Can materialize music notes with her magic guitar.

PUKIN

Can change the thoughts of anyone she stabs with her magic sword.

SONIA BEAN

Can make whatever she touches crumble to bits.

Magical Girl Raising Project

Magical Girl Raising Project limited

6

Asari Endou
Illustration by Marui-no

YEN ON
New York

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Asari Endou

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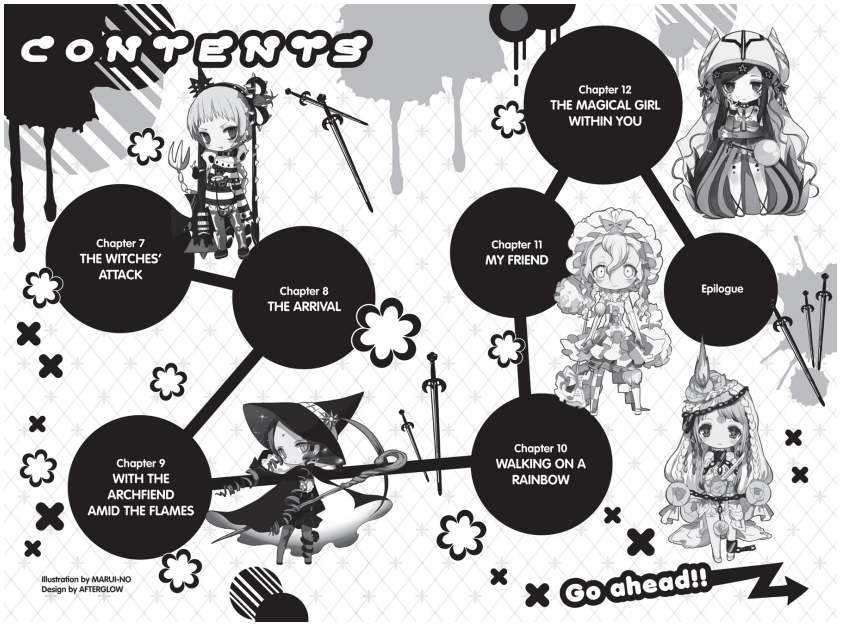
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CHAPTER 7
THE WITCHES' ATTACK

☆ **Weddin (Time remaining: fifteen hours, twenty-two minutes)**

They were dashing through the night at intense speed in a destructive game of tag when four more magical girls appeared from inside the factory, interrupting them.

Now there were nine of them in total, some glaring at each other, others smiling foolishly in front of the abandoned factory that had gone bust after the economic bubble burst. The deteriorated landscape, filled with broken streetlamps, crushed asphalt, and twisted fences, clashed with the beautifully decorated girls.

Weddin shivered when she saw the four who'd appeared out of that hole. They were decisively different from the magical girls they had seen thus far. When that ninja had nailed her down, Weddin had trembled, fearing she was in for a painful experience. When Bunny Ears had chased her around, she'd felt despondent just thinking about what might be done to her if she were caught, and her yelling at Tepsekemei had been an attempt to alleviate such feelings, even just a bit.

Both of those magical girls had been very scary. Weddin was no match for either, and even Tepsekemei and Kuru-Kuru Hime, who were stronger than her, couldn't beat either of the two one-on-one.

Seeing the four girls now emerging, Weddin realized her mistake. Her fear of Bunny Ears and the ninja had just been her own cowardice. She'd been needlessly frightened of enemies whom she'd fundamentally had no reason to fear. Bunny Ears and the ninja were firmly within the fantastical realm that encompassed magical girls. There was no raw violence to them.

These four were different. They carried nothing *but* the air of raw violence. Just standing here in front of them made Weddin want to slump down on the spot—or, barring that, grovel at their feet.

She resisted the urge to collapse. No matter how she tried to force it down, fear rampaged inside her, ready to burst out if it just had the chance. With the utmost effort, she calmed her feelings, put a lid on it all, and looked over at Bunny Ears. Her face had gone stiff—it wasn't the way you'd look at reinforcements.

"I recommend doing your utmost to avoid resisting. You don't want to get hurt, do you?" the fortune-teller told them. It seemed she wasn't Bunny Ears's ally. The enemy of her enemy was also an enemy. The situation was complicated. But being that things weren't simple, there might be something Weddin could do here.

"No more games, asshole!" With that juvenile taunt, Grace sliced at the enemy, and the fencer responded leisurely, blocking her attack. The pirate's boorish cutlass and the fencer's magnificent rapier slammed straight into each other, the sound of clashing metal echoing through the narrow back road.

Grace pushed at her cutlass and tried to kick her opponent in the stomach, but the fencer slipped away, and the strike missed her body. Grace ripped the twisted chain-link fence out of the ground and threw that, too, but the fencer sliced it into bits with her rapier. Grace's attacks still kept coming. She kicked off the wall of the building to get herself going, then turned back to kick through the cement-block barrier and showered her opponent with rubble. The fencer hopped onto a block of rubble as it flew through the air, then casually landed on the ground. The chunks of cement the fencer had dodged shot through the wall of the building like bullets, destroying it.

Weddin was about to go help Grace, but then she stopped herself. She could barely even keep track of how fast Grace was moving, and her enemy was trading blows with her cheerily at a speed no lesser. Any attempt by Weddin to join in the fray would bring about further danger. She should avoid intervening thoughtlessly. Weddin began to ponder what she should do—what move she should make.

Her allies didn't move—or no, they couldn't move, could they? Funny Trick was trembling, all the color drained from her face. Tepsekemei's eyes were quite a bit calmer in comparison, the same

old vacant expression as she focused her gaze on the remaining enemies. Their enemies were smiling, or smirking, as they watched the fight. They weren't worried. Bunny Ears turned tail and ran.

The fortune-teller whispered something to the fencer, who nodded coolly.

The musician and fortune-teller jumped over Weddin and the others together, kicking off the building in a wall-jump to chase after Bunny Ears.

If Weddin was going to fight, now was the time. But even with the enemy's numbers cut in half, Weddin still didn't feel she and her friends could win. They shouldn't try to win by fighting, in which case, Grace was getting in the way. Thoughts switching dizzyingly fast, in the end, Weddin yelled, "Leave me behind! Get out of here!"

Weddin had made everyone agree to listen to their leader's orders if the time came. Even if they hadn't been serious when they'd made that promise, Weddin's magic would not allow them to default on that contract.

Grace hopped up atop the building, still brandishing her cutlass at the enemy. Funny Trick leaped away, too; Tepsekemei shot Weddin a brief look, but as she couldn't disobey the order, she floated up into the sky.

The last of the enemies—the one covered in patches, stationed at the factory entrance—nodded to the fencer, then rushed up to the top of the building. The fencer didn't follow but instead approached Weddin. Having seen the fencer cross swords with Grace, Weddin knew she was no match for this opponent.

Her head was swimming. She had to concentrate, or she couldn't breathe. It was hard to get ahold of herself. Transforming into a magical girl boosted her resistance to the cold, but a chill was running down her spine all the same. She felt she might freeze. A puff of white steam appeared when she exhaled a deep breath before slowly dissipating.

The clash between Grace and the fencer had been one of life-and-death, an excuse for Weddin to think she hadn't interfered because they'd moved too quickly. There was no reason any rational human being would have interfered with that tangle of beasts seeking to rip each other's throats out.

Calm down, she told herself. Bunny Ears had lured two of their opponents away, so they'd managed to split the enemies up. And since patchwork girl was chasing after three of them solo, at the

very least, two of them would be able to escape—while sacrificing one. But Weddin wasn't thinking about this in a sentimental fashion. Her judgments were based on calculation. They were running away from enemies they couldn't beat, so even two out of three being saved was a good deal.

And besides, she had to fight one-on-one. The candles on her costume made fizzling sounds as they burned.

Don't be timid. Be bold. I'm the leader. I'm not gonna lose.

The fencer was approaching, a broad smile on her face. She was refined and aristocratic but also looked like death itself. What would happen if Weddin died? Was there an afterlife? Could it be classified into heaven and hell? And if she died, was that the end? Once you lost your life, was it just eternal nothingness, with no consciousness?

The fear of death welled up in her stomach. She clenched her jaw and held back her feelings.

Weddin—Mine Musubiya—was egocentric in all respects. She based all her decisions on calculations of profit and loss. When she'd made all the others escape, she'd done it with the overall benefits and drawbacks in mind. Since she knew she was too slow to run anyway, she figured it'd be more beneficial to decisively remain than to flee. Her choice to remain had not at all been a generous one, based on self-sacrifice.

She had a chance at winning. Facing the fencer, Weddin raised both her hands. She forced her stiffening face to soften and smiled, as her opponent did. "I've lost. I surrender. I'll fight no more. Please, spare my life."

The fencer looked like she didn't quite understand. Weddin then recalled that her opponent spoke a foreign language… She'd talked so fast, it'd been hard to catch, but she most likely spoke English. So Weddin corrected herself: "I surrender."

Ten feet away, the fencer stopped in her tracks. She flicked the feather decoration on her head with a fingertip, the corners of her mouth turning up. Was she smiling? She seemed wary, too.

Weddin remained tense despite having declared her surrender. She hadn't put her hands up because she'd sincerely given in. In fact, she felt the battle was just beginning.

Direct conflict and competitions of physical strength, like the sort Grace engaged in, were not the only ways to fight. Deliberately being captured by the enemy was another. Weddin's powers forced

people to keep their promises. The number of promises was unlimited, and even if she broke the promise herself, the other person would still be obligated to keep theirs.

Once captured, she would probably be questioned. Weddin felt uneasy about conversing in English, but she'd be fine if there was someone to translate for her. She would draw out the questioning just a little bit, then drag things out as best she could (without getting to the point of torture) and try to create more opportunities for conversation. Bit by bit, she would gather promises from them—it didn't matter how trivial they were. Weddin would win if the enemy assumed verbal promises were meaningless. She'd work from the inside, dragging things out slowly, bit by bit by bit…

The fencer came within half a step of Weddin and brandished her sword twice before sheathing it.

"Is that so? An admirable attitude." A moment ago, Weddin hadn't been able to catch what the fencer was saying, but now, she could understand it clearly. It wasn't Japanese. She was still speaking in English.

Weddin didn't question this, accepting it as if it were natural. She bowed her head. "Thank you very much. I'm grateful for your generous treatment."

"By the way…" The fencer smiled properly this time. She didn't look even the least bit cautious. "Though it may not appear so, our occupation is that of an inspector. As one might expect, many liars have come before us." Still unguarded, she calmly approached Weddin and put her hand on her shoulder. "We have encountered such folk over the course of many, many years, you see. And so we've come to understand people, somewhat, simply by looking at their faces. When one is bound to do evil in the future, or lies to us, or attempts to deceive us, or is plotting something, it's all so apparent in their countenance."

She gripped Weddin's shoulders with the kind of closeness of an old friend and pulled her rapier four inches from its sheath to show her the blade. "I use this sword on such imprudent folk. This sword is magic. Those cut by it are struck by misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?"

"Yes, misunderstanding. Just the smallest, slightest misunderstanding. For example, the misunderstanding that a foe one should be fighting is, in fact, the master one must protect with one's life. They would not simply become our attendant. They

would do anything in our service. Oh-ho, don't you think of it as brainwashing. *When we cut someone, their reality changes.* Therefore, even one with whom 'twas impossible to communicate is now able to enjoy amicable conversation with us."

She slipped her sword back in its sheath with a snap. "Now then, work yet remains… What's your name?"

"I'm Weddin."

"A good name. So then be of aid to us."

Pukin dashed off, with Weddin following cheerfully behind. Weddin had admired Pukin for ten years. She'd always obeyed any order from Pukin, and following her was always the right choice. She had no regrets in betraying her allies for Pukin. Pukin came first, over everything.

☆ Captain Grace (Time remaining: fifteen hours, fifteen minutes)

Grace was irritated at her body for running away against her will but also privately relieved that she'd managed to escape—and that feeling made her blood boil. She crossed over buildings and roofs, running, jumping, racing through pitch-black alleyways, but she could still feel the enemy behind her, never leaving.

This may have been the first time in Grace's life that she'd hesitated in a fight. Umi Shibahara never wavered in the heat of battle. It was always clear to her what to do. Be it punching, kicking, or grappling into a throw, all she needed was to maintain the will to fight and enact violence as her body commanded it.

She'd always scoffed at the average Joe who'd freeze up whenever petty gangsters picked fights with them. If you can win, you should fight. If you can't, then you should run. It was stupid to let them rob you without doing either.

When the four magical girls had appeared, it wasn't that Grace had been unable to move. She'd just hesitated.

The four girls who had broken through the factory entrance to appear before them were strong. The one with the guitar on her back and the one with the crystal ball were so strong, they might have been on par with Bunny Ears and the ninja. The one with the sword and the patchwork girl were even stronger. Even though they

were glaring at each other on equal footing, Grace felt as if she was being looked down on.

The situation was bad. Grace could try to fight, caught between these girls and Bunny Ears, but what about the others? Tepsekemei could escape into the air, but if the enemy went for Funny Trick and Weddin, Grace sensed she'd have her hands too full to defend them.

These thoughts felt like excuses and angered her. Grace slashed with her sword in an attempt to shake off her weakness.

Her plan was to slay the first enemy in one strike, but it had easily been evaded. Her opponent's thin sword looked like it could be bent with the slightest smack, but it was startlingly flexible as it blocked her swing. The fencer and the other three foes who were watching the two battle had all grinned in amusement.

They'd been making light of Grace. The simmering in her mind passed the boiling point. Right as Grace abandoned trying to defend herself and was about to strike out with all her might, Weddin gave the order to retreat.

Weddin's magic forced her to flee when she didn't want to. It was maddening, but it enabled her to cool her head a bit. At the very least, she could pretend she'd regained her calm.

One of the enemy magical girls was chasing her—not the one with the sword but the patchwork one. Her eyes were shining in anticipation as she followed about thirty feet behind.

Weddin had ordered the girls to leave her behind and run, so she must have remained there. There would be at least one enemy there with her. Bunny Ears had fled prior to Weddin's command, and Grace had noticed the crystal ball girl and guitar girl following after her. If you did the math, that meant none of the enemies were chasing Funny Trick.

Her guess that Funny Trick was escaping without anyone in tow calmed Grace, taking some pressure off. It seemed her partner's life was safe, for the time being.

Kayo Nemura had received top marks in the first grade, but that wasn't why Umi had approached her. Umi had used a trick she'd learned from anime—she'd searched for people with similar tastes by looking at the borrowing history on their library cards. In this case, Kayo shared her interests. She'd caught a sidelong glance at Kayo reading *The Robber Hotzenplotz* in the library at lunchtime,

turning pages with an intent look on her face as if she herself were in the middle of an adventure. When Umi poked Kayo's cheek with her pointer finger, she was so focused on the book that she didn't seem to notice at all. Kayo's cheek was soft.

Umi took a liking to her. Ever since then, she'd started proactively developing their connection. Umi was good at ignoring all rules or manners to invade people's personal spaces.

Kayo and Umi had traversed the whole island of Honshu during summer vacation in fourth grade.

In fifth grade, when Umi had beat up the teacher of the karate dojo she'd joined, Kayo had been with her, too.

And when Umi had gotten into a spat with the motorcycle gang Love-Life in their first year of middle school, Kayo had been by her side then, too.

Kayo's job was to soothe and chide Umi when she tried to barrel on ahead and push on forward. Even when Umi's rational mind was telling her it was best to pull back for the time being, her emotions would move her feet of their own accord. That was the way she was. If she'd been on her own, she would have gone on raging and rampaging forever. She felt having Kayo there as her strategist enabled her to be her strongest. But that was embarrassing, so she didn't say it out loud.

That was when Grace sensed something. There wasn't just the enemy pressing in on her from behind—someone else was running alongside her, too. *A new enemy?* she thought and looked over to see it was a familiar magical girl running with her. Captain Grace kept herself from swearing aloud. It was Funny Trick. Funny Trick put equal distance between herself, Grace, and the enemy, drawing a triangle between the three of them.

It wasn't like she had to be attached to Grace at the hip, so what was Funny Trick thinking, following her? They outnumbered the enemy, so if they'd have just run in different directions, then at the very least, one or two of them could have managed to escape safely. *Does she get that these new enemies are crazy strong?* Grace thought indignantly as she ran, but still, she was a little glad Funny Trick had followed her, and the corners of her lips curved into a smile. She couldn't bring herself to believe the reason Funny Trick wanted to fight was because she couldn't tell the enemies were powerful. She had to give her partner credit for that.

As Grace ran atop the roof, she stomped her feet to crack the

tiles off, then raked the broken tiles with her toes and tossed them backward. The enemy ignored the shards flying at her, hot on her heels and not slowing even a hair. She didn't seem to be injured or even flinching.

Grace was disappointed that the tiles were completely ineffective. But it seemed taking offensive action by tossing tiles backward was possible, and just checking that she could do that was meaningful on its own. Weddin's magic was forcing Grace to flee, but she possessed a degree of discretion on just how she would do so.

She tried slowing down. Slackening her legs' pace just a bit made the distance between her and the enemy shrink. It seemed she wasn't compelled to run as fast as she could. She fastened some rope from her pirate ship onto her hook. She'd have liked to tie a marine- or sailor-style knot on it, but unfortunately, she didn't know much about knots. So she just tied it tight, figuring it was okay as long as it held for now.

Grace jumped off the roof and tossed the rope and hook out to catch on the bridge of an overpass, swinging over to stand on top of it. The enemy still followed her—but unlike Grace, she lacked any tools. So Grace won herself some distance, even if it was only a few yards.

Because of the time of day, there were no cars going by on the overpass. Now, she could do this.

The enemy coming after Grace clambered up to the overpass, but then things started flying at her from the air above, booming with impact as they made contact with the asphalt in succession. Grace looked up into the sky. Tepsekemei was attacking while she flew away from the enemy.

It seemed the others also intended to attack as they ran away. Grace laughed out loud in delight. She saw Funny Trick coming after the enemy up to the top of the overpass.

More air bullets flew, followed by blasting sounds and the pattering of concrete raining down.

As Grace fled, she turned to look behind herself. Of course, she slowed a bit, and the enemy got closer. The magical girl wearing the patch-covered costume was smiling gleefully. She was just like a predator opening its mouth the moment before it killed its prey, rejoicing that she was about to sink her teeth into it.

Like hell I'll let you, Grace thought, spreading her hands and pushing them out palm-first in front of her.

She wasn't at a safe enough distance, but she was prepared to take a certain amount of damage. Captain Grace summoned her pirate ship right before her and her enemy's eyes.

It appeared suddenly, completely ignoring the law of conservation of matter to crush the rushing foe. The force of it blew Grace back from where she stood and shattered the road surface.

As Grace was blasted back and rolled away, she whooped in joy. The enemy hadn't been able to dodge it. She'd felt that.

Funny Trick slowed down, and Tepsekemei gradually descended. The enemy was gone now. There was no more need to run.

"All right, now—," Grace started to say but was interrupted. A blob of black haze leaped out from the bow of the ship, cutting through the dust.

Though Grace's ship was wooden, it was still a magic ship. It could race across water at subsonic speeds, with durability surpassing the laws of physics enabling it to resist the air and water. It was not so poorly built that it would easily break from a few hits by a magical girl.

A mouth like a great, merciless abyss opened up within the pirate ship, Captain Grace's pride and joy. An erosion like a creeping black stain ate into the boat as the enemy leaped forward at a pace just as fast as when she'd started her sprint. As she rushed past, she bumped against Tepsekemei's shoulder, and the part she touched turned to black haze before scattering and vanishing. Tepsekemei's usual vacant visage crumbled, and with an incredulous look in her eyes, she stared at the empty space where that part of her body should have been.

The patch-covered magical girl closed the gap between her and

Grace in a single bound, reaching out to her. Grace blocked that hand with her dagger, but she didn't even feel like the dagger connected with anything as it was scraped away by the mist, and as the girl stroked Grace's face, her vision went entirely black.

Grace couldn't see. She had only ever fought blinded a handful of times—and this time, her opponent was crazy strong, even more powerful than Bunny Ears and the black sphere.

What an adventure! When the tales of Grace's exploits were written down one day, this would have to be the climax. She would have to get her partner, Funny Trick, to look over it for her as her chronicler. The role of chronicler was a rather bland one, but following her like she did, it was something of an obligation for her.

She really doesn't know how to roll with the punches.

That was exactly why Grace had to protect her.

As she imagined their shining future, Captain Grace's consciousness plunged deep into darkness.

☆ Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: fifteen hours, fifteen minutes)

Bunny Ears had frighteningly fast legs. It was the most Tot Pop and Frederica could do to keep up with her.

A magical girl's physical appearance made her nature laughably obvious. This factor was not something to be underestimated. If a girl had wings, that meant she could fly with them; if she had a long tail, she could grab things with it; and if she carried weapons, she was able to wield them. Aside from such straightforward characteristics, it was not uncommon for their overall motif to symbolize their nature.

In other words, a magical girl with a rabbit motif would probably be faster than those with a fortune-teller or musician as their motifs. There was a reason why rabbit's feet were said to help you escape from trouble. The girl was putting both her hands and feet on the ground like an actual rabbit, and she was gradually pulling away from them.

"This doesn't look good, master," said Tot Pop to Frederica. "She might get away."

"If she escapes us now, we're bound to be branded as useless."

"That'd suck."

“I’d prefer to avoid that, too. Let’s do our best, as master and student, and show them we can be useful.” Frederica searched her memories. Rabbit ears and a kimono. She seemed to recall such a girl in the Inspection Department named Hana Gekokujou. Of all the people within this barrier, this was the one magical girl she could say for certain was a member of the inspection team, which would make her a valuable hostage. Sonia and Pukin weren’t suited to nonlethal capture missions, so Frederica couldn’t allow them to give chase, which was why she’d decided to take Tot Pop to chase Hana down with her—but Hana was hopelessly faster than them.

“Miss Gekokujou!” Frederica called out. The rabbit’s long ears twitched. It was good that she reacted. It was basically proof that this was Hana Gekokujou and also indicated she was fairly honest by nature.

Frederica informed Tot Pop of the rabbit’s identity. It was best to share information. “Hana Gekokujou. Her magic is to sharpen senses. She’ll manipulate your senses if you get too close to her. Be careful.”

“Nice one, master. You always know everything about magical girls. A real enthusiast.”

“She’s a member of the Inspection Department and is responsible for exposing internal crimes. She uses her ability to sharpen senses to scout for enemies, but even more than that, she’s also skilled in hand-to-hand combat. Do not be deceived by her appearance and believe that a direct fight with her is one you can win.”

“Yeah, yeah. Roger.”

Frederica continued to dig up even more knowledge on Hana Gekokujou. “Miss Gekokujou! Is Mana doing well?”

Long ears swaying left and right, Hana’s upper body rose gradually until she came to a halt and turned around. Frederica stopped, too, holding her right arm out to keep Tot Pop back. She looked at Hana, an amicable smile plastered across her face. Hana looked suspicious.

Frederica quickly confirmed their positions. They were about thirty feet away from each other, standing in a narrow lane with a drainage ditch running along one side. She could also see a culvert nearby flowing somewhere unknown. It would be difficult to chase Hana down if she were to escape there. Hana must have stopped because she’d calculated this. She was a tough enemy.

“We’ve come from outside the barrier to support you. With quite the amount of enemies around here, you must be having some difficulty, aren’t you?”

“You can’t trick me.” Hana’s response was cutting.

“Trick you? What do you mean?”

“You were just talking about me, weren’t you? I’ve got good ears, so I heard everything.”

“…How amazing.”

“But even if I hadn’t heard you, I wouldn’t be fooled by someone as notorious as yourself. Any inspector who doesn’t know the name and face of Pythie Frederica is unqualified.”

“Oh… Well, well… Oh, dear.” Frederica cracked a bashful smile. She’d hoped that perhaps Hana would return the favor, but the rabbit’s expression remained stiff. Though her posture seemed relaxed, with her arms hanging at her sides, you could tell just by looking that she was ready to dash off immediately. Her guard was flawless. She really was tough.

“So then why have you stopped to listen to me?”

“How do you know Mana is our team chief? You were imprisoned before she was appointed.”

Frederica had poked around here and there, at top secret documents and meeting reports. She’d figured that if she came up with people who seemed like they would later be installed in the Inspection Department and named them one after another, she’d find something eventually. She’d only hit bingo on her first guess because the personnel choices in the Inspection Department were proceeding as planned.

Anything would have been fine, as long as it achieved her goal of stopping Hana.

“Mana and I have something of a relationship.” Frederica acted very much as if she were now going to tell Hana what was going on, but as she spoke, as part of a seemingly natural gesture, she put her left hand into her crystal ball and pulled it out again.

“What…?”

But before Hana’s doubt could be resolved, Frederica threw the three hand grenades in her hand. The pins were already removed. They sailed over Hana’s head, rolling behind her, and simultaneously, Tot Pop strummed her guitar. Music notes of varying sizes assailed Hana in a cacophonous torrent.

The grenades exploded ahead of Hana, sending fragments of

concrete flying in all directions. Frederica's hair flew up from the blast's impact. She braced her legs firmly and thrust her left hand into the crystal ball once more.

The hair wrapped around her right index finger was a strand she'd received from the subordinate of Tot Pop's with the most beautiful hair. Reflected in her crystal ball was the subordinate's location: the interior of a weapons warehouse. With Frederica's magic, she could pull out whatever weapon she liked, as needed. Even a magical girl would not go unharmed if she were hit by one of the Magical Kingdom's weapons.

Hana couldn't escape them. If she kept going to where the grenades lay, she would either be seriously wounded or killed.

She couldn't rush straight at them, either. The moment Frederica had thrown the grenades, Tot Pop strummed her guitar, sending her physically manifested music notes flowing out. Even a seemingly decorative weapon like music notes was bound to injure her even more than the grenades, if she were to take a direct hit.

So Hana chose the third option. With the wind of the blast at her back, she leaped, kicking off a cement-block wall, then off an electrical pole, attempting to run not forward or back but up.

But that was the choice Frederica wanted her to pick.

She'd anticipated how Hana would try to escape. Immediately, she changed her crystal ball's channel. Tot Pop's hair was wrapped around her left middle finger, and reflected in her ball was the space occupied by Tot Pop, Frederica, and Hana. Frederica thrust her left hand into the crystal ball to manifest it in Hana's path.

She grabbed Hana's ankle in midair and yanked on it, making her lose her balance and fall to the ground. Hana spun three times in the air, but Tot Pop's second assault of music notes flooded into the spot where she landed.

The torrent of music notes battered her defenseless back, and Tot Pop ground away on the strings, the eighth notes hitting the concrete wall becoming quarter notes and bouncing to assault Hana's body from every direction. Tot Pop's music notes continued to thrash Hana until Frederica stopped her, saying, "That's enough." The final music note fell on the road with a thud, melting away to vanish. Frederica patted Tot Pop's head as if to say, *"Good girl."*

"What a marvelous student you are. I didn't even have to give you a signal for you to know what I wanted."

"Well, I *am* your number one student, master. I can tell what

you're thinking," Tot Pop said with a cheerful grin.

Tot Pop stood with her guitar still at the ready as Frederica approached where Hana was curled up. Frederica kicked the side of her stomach with a toe to roll her over onto her back. Hana lay with both arms wrapped around her body, seemingly unconscious. The fact that she remained transformed, despite having passed out, brought Frederica's opinion of her up a few notches.

Frederica grabbed Hana by the neck and tossed her into her crystal ball.

☆ Archfiend Pam (Time remaining: fourteen hours, fifty-three minutes)

All that remained before the abandoned factory was the battle's aftermath. There was nobody there: no enemies, no allies.

Archfiend Pam bit her thumb. She'd been constantly behind, ever since the attack on the apartment building.

The Arabian dancing girl had wobbled along through the air, coming to ask Pam for help. Without any wariness or anxiety, she'd come before Archfiend Pam, who had been walking through the town with the two girls, searching for enemies or allies. The dancer remained calm and unbothered despite Pam being on her guard.

Pam remembered this opponent. This was the one she'd fought in the sky earlier, the one who had escaped. The Arabian-style dancing girl ignored Archfiend Pam and the questions she attempted to press her with, simply facing Postarie and Rain Pow to say, "They're chasing Weddin. Come help her." And when Pam grabbed her shoulder in an *"enough of this"* manner to make her turn around, she'd disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Pam checked with Rain Pow and Postarie that the magical girl who'd just visited them was their ally. In the end, they had no choice but to try going off in the direction the Arabian dancing girl had come from.

Since Archfiend Pam was using two of her four wings as coats for Postarie and Rain Pow and one for her own coat, she only had one remaining wing to use to search for enemies. Making do with just one wing was proving extremely difficult.

But still, she couldn't abandon the two girls, either. She needed

to meet up with her allies and get 7753 or Mana to take care of them, but since their magical phones were useless right now, locating them would be rather tricky.

There were traces of unnatural damage at the factory entrance. This was no uncomplicated act of destruction, like punching, melting, or burning. It was akin to corrosion or oxidation yet subtly different.

"Can any of your allies use magic like this?"

"…I don't know."

"Does 'I don't know' mean you don't want to talk about it?"

"N-no! I really don't know!"

Pam didn't have to bother using truth serum. The girl didn't seem to be lying.

Pam shaved off a trace of the destruction, rubbing it with her fingertip, and it crumbled away. It was clearly something magical, probably the result of extremely strong abilities. This might be too much to handle even for someone like Hana or Ripple, who were both practiced in combat.

This was just like what had happened with the apartment building. Pam could tell there was something going on, but she didn't know what. And what's more, she had two tagalongs she didn't know what to do about.

Rain Pow still seemed cheerful—if you punched her down, she'd get right back up—but Postarie was mentally exhausted. There was nothing for it but to take breaks to rest as they pushed forward.

Archfiend Pam happened to glance behind her and saw Rain Pow and Postarie whispering to each other, so she slapped them across their cheeks. It would've been so much easier if she just could have left them here.

☆ **Toko (Time remaining: fourteen hours, thirty-two minutes)**

I'm part of Rain Pow's body, she told herself silently, staying still. Everything would come crashing down if her presence were to be noticed. Fortunately, it seemed Postarie wasn't telling Pam that Toko was hiding there.

Toko had heard the name Archfiend Pam before. It was one that always came up when anyone discussed who the strongest magical girl was. There were whispers that Archfiend's magic could cause destruction on an immense scale, and to Toko, that seemed at the very least unnecessary for a mission involving the search and capture of a criminal. It was like if a cop asked for help and a tank showed up.

Shit. They're totally planning to kill us.

Toko had considered the possibility of the Department of Diplomacy sending in a powerful magical girl. She knew the two of them were a thorn in the department's side, and the department had the power to erase those who got in their way. But she hadn't anticipated that the department would be willing to deploy personnel who would also cause harm to regular civilians. She'd underestimated them.

With these thoughts in mind, Toko had been feeling on edge, but something here seemed quite strange. It looked like Pam was trying to avoid harming the general public. It also seemed as if she was trying to protect Postarie and Rain Pow. She showed slight caution toward the two girls but wasn't treating them like enemies or prisoners. It was proof enough that she hadn't searched or disarmed them.

In that case, this was a weakness they could take advantage of.

Toko was particularly skilled at taking advantage of people's virtues or ethics. Her partner shared that skill set since she'd taught them what she knew. She would play the victim, pretend to be just a citizen, act like a good person, and in the end, stab them in the back. There couldn't be more than one magical girl of Archfiend Pam's level dispatched here. If they took out Pam, then Toko's ally, the one who meowed at the ends of their sentences, would get them out of here.

Archfiend Pam was one of the most exceptionally powerful magical girls Toko had ever seen—not just in the scale of her destruction but also mentally.

They had to take out this indomitable foe. If anyone was capable of pulling that off, it was Toko's partner. They were more cunning, underhanded, unfair, calculating, and mean than even Toko herself. She was sure to snatch her chance to take advantage of Archfiend Pam's weakness.

☆ Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: fourteen hours, twenty-one minutes)

The wind carried the police sirens to them. The apartment building had to be pretty far from the ruined town factory, but magical girls had far sharper senses than humans.

Frederica closed the window and drew the curtains, then turned back to the room.

Everything in the fridge that was edible was now deposited in Pukin's and Sonia's stomachs. Pukin was washing down some bread with a bottle of barley tea, while Sonia poured an upturned bag of candy straight into her mouth.

Tot Pop was working in the kitchen. Frederica had entrusted all the food that needed cooking to her. This situation felt like the setup for a joke: making a Brit cook a meal. It was a little funny. Recalling that their diners were also Brits, though, it made sense.

Tot Pop had smacked her chest as she took the task upon herself, saying, "I haven't lived alone this long for nothing!" But this seemed a bit sad to Frederica. As her master, she hoped Tot Pop could find a good partner.

From the state of the apartment, the food, and the furniture and such, Frederica could determine the resident's lifestyle, social position, and class. He was a middle-aged man with a higher-than-average income who lived alone, had a moderate degree of fun, and overall had seemed to live comfortably. Since he was now lying in the shadow of the sofa, all she could see of him were his ankles and the blood flowing from his body. He'd been a scrupulous cleaner, had enough food on hand, and was properly organized, too. Quite praiseworthy for a bachelor. Frederica put her hands together in thanks.

Then there were the other three. She'd left the stage magician girl lying on the floor. The girl in the wedding dress was beside Pukin, a soft look on her face as she happily watched Pukin eat. The other one was farther away, tossed alone into a corner of the room. Tot Pop had knocked her around pretty badly, so her face was swollen, and she had a few broken bones. The light of determination that remained in her eyes only made her look even more pitiful.

Funny Trick and Hana were both bound with rope. This rope, brought out from the weapons storehouse, was strong enough that

even a magical girl couldn't tear it easily.

"I don't enjoy pain, so no torture, please. Please tell me if there's anything you want to know. I'll answer anything. It's not as if the Magical Kingdom or my superiors have done enough for me that I feel indebted to them. And I'm not even paid that much, considering how they work me to the bone." Hana babbled along as if she was even willing to tell them things they hadn't asked. Her cheeks were swollen and some of her teeth had to be broken, but she still spoke clearly and made herself easy to understand. Frederica translated every single word, in full, for Pukin, and Pukin wiped her mouth with a napkin and stood from her seat.

"You should avoid approaching her too closely, General," said Frederica. "Her magic will activate, even if you don't touch her."

"We are aware… You, rabbit." With her left hand, Pukin drew her dagger, pointing it at Hana from ten feet back. "You have quite the amount of strength in your eyes for someone who claims to lack any loyalties to the Magical Kingdom or even her superiors. Yours are not the dull, muddied, and rotten-sick eyes of an apathetic bureaucrat. They are the beautiful, sparkling eyes of a proper magical girl. We like them not."

Frederica translated Pukin's words to Hana, who replied, "Maybe my eyes look that way from the eyelid glue."

Upon hearing Frederica's translation, Pukin's eyebrows came together in a slight scowl.

Frederica was also aware that Hana would never cooperate. Her magical phone's in-box had been empty, and when they'd asked if her group had agreed to some sort of meetup spot for emergencies, she'd insisted they had no such thing.

"If I know something, I'll tell you. But I can't answer if I don't know. Right? That's just obvious. I *can* teach you how to do good eyelid glue, though."

When Frederica translated Hana's response, Pukin swung her left hand wordlessly, throwing her dagger to stick into the wall, where it quivered. The rabbit's right ear, which had been between the wall and Pukin, was cut down to about half its length, and a muffled scream escaped from Hana's throat.

Frederica grimaced, saying, "Oh, that looks like it hurts," and the magician girl gave a tiny yelp.

"I told you… I hate pain…"

"You mocked us just now, did you not? We never overlook such

affronts."

"Owww… It huuurts…"

Now Pukin drew her rapier with her right hand and threw it as she had her dagger. Frederica reached out to grab the rapier by its handle, stopping the blade an inch before Hana's chest.

"Your Excellency, don't you think it's too soon to eliminate a source of information?"

"That one is a staunch professional. She may put on an admirable act of spilling it all to us, but I doubt she has any such intention. 'Twould be inconvenient and dangerous to attempt to make her squeal while being forced to always maintain ten feet of distance from her. Instead, one ought to make an example of her in order to facilitate gathering intel from others. A talented torturer needn't fuss over how many sources of information one has."

"Oh, I see. Forgive my impertinence. However, even if she can't be a source of information for us, I think she may make a good hostage. I've heard that there's a certain camaraderie among the Inspection Department's employees."

"Hmph. So be it. Then I shall leave her treatment in your hands."

Frederica approached Pukin slowly and handed over her rapier with reverence, then spun to the right to face Hana, giving her a look warning her not to anger Pukin. Hana made a sarcastic smile and gave a slight nod.

It was clear that even without Pukin's short temper, Hana would be a difficult hostage to deal with. Pukin couldn't enter that ten-foot radius to mind-control her, which meant the better choice would be to knock her out like before. But Hana was now gravely injured; at this point, it would be difficult to hold back and just incapacitate her without dealing a fatal blow. Tot Pop's music notes were not suited to restraint.

They'd tried to force information out of Hana using Weddin's magic, but it hadn't gone well, as Hana had only ever spoken to her evasively and vaguely. Hana would also have seen that Weddin had been antagonistic to Frederica's party before, so it would seem odd to expressly make Hana speak only to Weddin. Hana would have had no way to know about Weddin's magic, but she'd figured out that much. Pukin was not wrong to take Hana for a staunch professional.

Frederica's eyes wandered back to the remaining girls. The

stage magician's teeth were chattering as she trembled violently. Weddin had already told them all they needed to know from her end. Now that she was Pukin's devotee, she told them everything, even things they hadn't asked.

Thanks to her, they had found out that Toko had turned a bunch of middle schoolers into magical girls. Weddin had written down each of their physical abilities and even their real human names in her notebook, saying that as the leader, she had to understand all their members. She had informed them that even their teacher and the turtle kept as a pet in the science room had been transformed as well, a fact that Frederica found deeply intriguing.

Even more intriguing was the ninja who had attacked Weddin. This girl had been hostile, so Weddin hadn't been able to acquire her personal information. But she knew what the ninja girl had looked like. She was one-armed and one-eyed, with a ninja motif, and Weddin said she had thrown kunai and shuriken with enough control to thread the eye of a needle, at the rapid-fire pace of a machine gun. Weddin told them about how the ninja had nailed her down to the roof of the apartment building by her costume, pinning her there.

As far as Frederica knew, there could only be one magical girl that fit that description. It was the closest friend of Frederica's final student, Snow White: the magical girl Ripple. Finding out that Ripple was within this barrier made delight shoot down Frederica's spine. The thought that perhaps it wasn't just Ripple, and maybe Snow White was with her, made her crumple in joy on the spot, falling to her knees.

Fate was a mysterious thing. Between magical girls, its effects were even more striking. "Don't you think?" asked Frederica.

"Uh-huh…"

Was Weddin's noise of agreement so limp because she was a newbie who knew nothing of the subtleties of magical-girl life or because she was under Pukin's control?

Weddin said that Sonia had killed the pirate captain, Grace, and Tepsekemei the lamp genie had lost half her body and fled up into the sky. Her survival was probably not purely due to her vitality. Had she compensated for her missing parts by assimilating herself with the wind? Or was it that being made of wind meant losing parts wouldn't be fatal for her? Whatever the case, she seemed quite

a bit tougher than the remaining magical girls.

Was the assassin among the girls from the middle school Weddin had told them about? Or were they just victims?

"Be that as it may…" Pukin swished her rapier. Dots of blood scattered over the azure sofa. "It seems we've largely completed our mission."

"What do you mean?" Frederica asked.

"Have we not already secured the villain you meant to capture? In other words, well…"

Frederica gave the stage magician a sidelong glance. Funny Trick's whole body was trembling, and she was curled up as tight as she could, great beads of sweat covering her skin. She looked so terrified, Frederica felt sorry for her. "You mean she's the assassin we've been looking for?"

"We are proud to say we have served as inspector for many a year. We have an eye for people."

"I see. I could call that a fairly sound basis for judgment."

"You recall there was that pirate girl."

"Yes, I recall." She must have been referring to the girl who had died in such a cruel manner that Frederica would never see again, the one whose cheek Sonia had stroked.

"And the conjurer over there." Pukin sheathed her rapier and, careful not to step in any blood, walked over to the wall to pull her dagger out, returning it to its sheath as well. "Sonia captured her when she flung herself upon the fallen pirate girl."

Sonia looked up and snorted proudly, then immediately returned to her meal.

"Isn't that so?"

"Aye."

"We saw distinctly with our own eyes when Sonia dragged that girl to us—when her own ally had just been killed and she herself was in dire straits, the faint light of glee shone deep in her eyes. Most would not feel joy at their ally's death. If she is indeed the villain in question, then she is the sort of fool who would fear not even God. She may not see her allies as allies and be glad of their deaths. We cannot comprehend such sensibilities, but some villains are of such abnormal nature. We know from experience."

"Okeydoke! Sorry for the wait." The air grew thicker with the faint wafting smell of cooking meat, visiting them with a billow of steam. Tot Pop was wearing an apron with a music-note pattern,

her hands holding a large plate covered with ham, boned rib, steak, and miscellaneous meats of all sorts cooked up in a pile. It smelled good, but the presentation was sloppy. Frederica felt this meal was a symbol of Tot Pop's personality, in a way.

Tot Pop arranged soy sauce, wasabi paste, mayonnaise, mustard, ketchup, shichimi, Worcestershire sauce, yakiniku sauce, salad dressing, and other various sauces on the table. "Pick whatever ones you like. All right, Tot's gonna go make extra."

On her way back, Tot Pop noticed Hana had one ear cut off and was quietly startled, saying, "Whoa!" But she didn't question it and instead returned to the kitchen.

"Calm down and eat, Sonia. Dead flesh shan't run away."

"Yes'm."

They resumed their meal in silence, Sonia with her bare hands and Pukin wielding a knife and fork most elegantly. This seemed to not just be an intake of energy for them. They were enjoying the meal, too.

Frederica turned back to the magician girl. "I would like to ask one thing."

The stage magician was still trembling. Frederica clapped her hands loudly, and the girl's eyes turned to her. "What sort of relationship did you have with the pirate?" Frederica asked her in Japanese so she would understand. She examined Funny Trick closely. Her eyes were swimming all around. She had to be frightened by this situation already, since she was kidnapped, and the other hostage's ear had been cut off, too—but Frederica felt that question in itself had shaken her.

"According to Her Excellency the General over there, you were glad of the pirate girl's death."

Funny Trick's eyes opened so wide it looked like they might fall out of her head. She must have forgotten she was tied up with rope, as she twisted and flailed on the floor. "No! No! I wasn't!"

"But Her Excellency said she was certain of it."

"No! I…! I…!" The girl's eyes were pointed at Frederica but weren't looking at her. She seemed to be peering within herself, as if sifting through the depths of her being in search of her own heart. "I… I… I… I…"

Frederica watched her silently. This girl wasn't worked up because she'd been falsely accused of something, nor because her connection with the pirate had been sullied. This was the reaction

of someone with a truth they didn't want to have hit on forced upon them. Upon reexamining herself, speculating about herself, she didn't like the answer she had derived, and now she was throwing a tantrum about it.

"I… I… I…!!"

"Silence." Pukin threw the large plate at the stage magician. It hit her in the face, shattered, and fell to the carpet. The girl collapsed on top of the broken plate.

"Don't scream to us in a nonsense tongue. We are dining now. Be quiet a moment."

"So is she not the criminal, then, Your Excellency?"

Pukin had just thrown a plate at her, so she wasn't dead… But, well, even if it was just a plate, depending on where it hit, it could have been dangerous. Pukin had indeed thrown it with the intent to kill. And Frederica had already told Pukin that she wanted to capture the criminal, not kill them.

"No, she is not. Seeing her reaction has changed our mind. Do you know the saying, 'A wise man changes his mind, a fool, never'? With each new change, we adapt our evaluation based on that new information. She was abnormal to begin with. One of that little group is a simple, noncriminal, abnormal individual. Indeed the most confounding thing, don't you think?"

No matter how Pukin screwed things up, she would always use plausible excuses to make it as if she wasn't wrong. If Frederica were to let her have her way, she would kill every suspect they had.

Funny Trick was still shaking, collapsed facedown on the carpet. Frederica couldn't tell from looking at her what she was thinking.

"What say you, Frederica?"

"The notion that our target may be among those who escaped us is reasonable."

Hana Gekokujou was a talented inspector within the Magical Kingdom's Inspection Department and highly competent in both investigation and combat. The only reason she could possibly have come to this town would be to expose the criminal. And her target had to be the same as Frederica's party's: the assassin. Of course, she wouldn't be the assassin herself.

It wasn't Funny Trick, either. There may have been some estrangement or conflict in her personal relationship with the pirate, but that wasn't enough basis to call her the criminal. And

nothing about her manner when she'd been captured had suggested she was acting. Besides, the idea of a cold-blooded, vicious killer captured while clinging to a dead body was absurd in the first place. That wouldn't happen.

Frederica couldn't say anything about Captain Grace. She'd only seen her corpse after Sonia had killed her. It seemed she'd been a good fighter, but did she really fit as the assassin? Weddin had told them of her personality and informed them that Grace had occupied an attention-getting position as one of the most famous people at school, and this did not seem assassin-like to Frederica.

"Mmm. We share your opinion. The villain is among those who escaped. And in order to capture her, we need information. Therefore, we must search for tools with which to draw information from her."

"Toko, huh?"

"Indeed."

"If you were to wield your sword for us, Your Excellency, we could not only make her speak but gain another ally, as well." Those cut by Pukin's sword would be compelled into misunderstanding. If made to misunderstand she was their ally, they could get information about their target from her.

Sonia and Pukin both reached out for the last piece of meat at the same time before stopping. When Sonia timidly pulled her hand back, Pukin sliced the piece of meat in two and placed one half on Sonia's plate.

"We were paid to torture humans, as we were for interrogating magical girls. The Magical Kingdom compensated me for my skills in coin. However. This was not the case for familiars. Ever we heard talk of a fairy familiar that needed questioning, we would rush there immediately, saying, we need no coin! We'll wrest information from them for free! So grant us the honor!" Pukin placed the half piece of meat atop her tongue and chewed it slowly, then swallowed, meat juices dribbling from the corners of her mouth as she grinned. As a magical girl, Frederica had seen many similar smiles; it was the sadistic grin of a girl drunk on violence.

"Nothing is more amusing than the torture of a fairy. They scream with such pretty voices—not to mention there is fun to be had afterward, as well. We shan't allow even the benefactor who saved us from prison to steal that pleasure from us."

"Why would I possibly steal such a thing from Your

Excellency?"

"You think we can get it done with most quickly using our magic, don't you?"

"Oh no, not at all."

"Even our magic is not all-powerful. We can only use it on one person at a time. If we use our blade on a new target, the previous spell will be undone." As Pukin spoke, she stroked the jaw of the wedding dress girl who served at her side. The girl hummed in delight and leaned against Pukin. She'd been an enemy only thirty minutes ago but was now being made to serve as a member of Pukin's harem. She and Sonia glared at each other whenever their eyes happened to meet.

It seemed prioritizing Pukin's pleasure would be time-consuming.

Would it be faster just to kill all the suspects in B City? But what the antiestablishment factions wanted was the assassin's capture, not her death. Though Frederica had no noble desire to serve the antiestablishment factions to the end, if she were to just start by slaughtering everyone present, they would assume she had no intention of fulfilling their request. She needed a degree of freedom in order to control Pukin, but taking that freedom too far would turn into a rampage. It all depended on how Frederica steered this.

If it all seemed to be just too much trouble, it might be best to ignore the interests of the antiestablishment factions and have Pukin go wild, then escape in the chaos. In that case, it would also be best to arrange the appearance of her own death.

"Okaaaay! Sorry for the wait!" Tot Pop brought in more food: This time, it was fried fish and salad. The salad was a primitive one, just vegetables chopped up carelessly and served. Sonia grabbed it in her hands, while Pukin put two dried mackerel pike on her plate.

The poor fuel economy of this pair was one of their idiosyncrasies. In order to leverage that idiosyncrasy, a certain amount of labor was necessary. Frederica went into the kitchen and said to Tot Pop, "Let's make some boxed lunches. It would be no laughing matter if the two of them became immobile from hunger right when the enemy was in front of us."

"Would sandwiches work?"

"I was thinking rice balls."

"Oh, there's lots of rice here, so that'd be good, too. Maybe the

sort that don't use seaweed, since people either love it or hate it. Oh, and no pickled plums in them, either… That's also specific to certain preferences and not so simple to make."

When it came to boxed lunches, people had their own individual tastes, as with just about anything. Getting what you wanted was never easy.

CHAPTER 8
THE ARRIVAL

☆ Funny Trick (Time remaining: thirteen hours, fifty minutes)

For as long as she could remember, Funny Trick—Kayo Nemura—had lived in the shadow of a monster.

That monster was her childhood friend, Umi Shibahara. The word fit her far better than it did Miss Nozomi Himeno, who had been nicknamed Monster. Umi rampaged and destroyed. There was no resisting her, no turning her away.

The children ranked one another by physical strength. Umi Shibahara's exceptional physical prowess prohibited open resistance, so any complaints about her were whispered in secret and instead dumped on Kayo. Kids said Kayo was using Umi's presence to play the badass, that she was a suck-up to the top dog, that she acted all bossy because she had Umi but couldn't do anything by herself. Of course, people bad-mouthed Umi, too, but more so Kayo.

The reality was nothing like that. Kayo never felt being with Umi had brought her anything good. She would've rather not ever hung around her, if possible. She just couldn't fight Umi. Umi wouldn't leave her alone. Opposing her meant you'd get yourself beaten up, and Kayo wouldn't risk that for anything. She didn't even want to imagine getting punched or kicked by someone with the strength and endurance to break the climbing pole in the playground with a kick or swing around the biggest horizontal bar continuously for five minutes.

If I could get strong, too, at least, maybe things would be different, Kayo had thought, so she begged her parents to let her take a karate class, swearing she would work hard at it.

Kayo's karate instructor had taught her that physical strength wasn't enough to make you a strong person; what was important was strength of the heart. Her circumstances being what they were, Kayo had been impressed to the point of tears.

Yes, physical strength alone didn't make you strong. If she were calm and had a strong heart, she wouldn't feel so tormented by Umi. Kayo would never survive being around an outlaw like Umi, who lived for violence. The one she should be looking up to was her karate instructor.

Thinking back, he may have been Kayo's first crush. The man had been over forty years old, and Kayo had still just been in elementary school, but even so, Kayo's heart had burned with passion. This was someone she could follow, someone different from Umi, someone she wanted to be with.

Umi had pulverized those feelings. Kayo had spurned her one day, saying she was going to the karate dojo after school and wouldn't be able to hang out, to which Umi had given her a disgruntled look. That very day, Umi went to the karate dojo, beat the crap out of the coach and instructor, and made off with the dojo sign before departing, triumphant. Even a real outlaw didn't have to do it like that, right? The next day, there was a FOR SALE sign nailed to the dojo door, and Kayo's despair deepened.

Kayo's conviction that she just had to get away from Umi strengthened, and she threw herself into her studies. If she were to move on to a public middle school, Umi would follow her around forever until graduation day. But if she could go to a different school, any previous relationships would be rendered inaccessible. Her new life would be constructed based on her new school. Her and Umi's friendship would naturally weaken before fading away.

Wholeheartedly determined, Kayo poured all her time and attention into her schoolwork. She told only her parents and teachers that she was going to take private-school entrance exams and took care not to run into other students when she went for interviews and practice tests. She also impressed upon her parents and teachers not to tell anyone. Even as she was forced to go on Umi's "adventures," she whittled down her sleeping hours to study for entrance exams. She'd always been good at memorization, and with the powerful motivation of wanting to escape from Umi on top of that, the task wasn't at all a struggle.

After doing everything she could, Kayo confronted the exams.

She took the utmost caution with her health, too, fending off illness with good food and vaccinations. There were a number of students from her school at Namiyama Middle School, where the exams were being held, and they were surprised to see Kayo there, since she'd hidden that she would be taking the exams. But more than that, they were surprised to see Umi there. Kayo was shocked, too. Why was *she* there?

When she ran into her at the exam site, it felt like a bad joke. Nobody was supposed to have told Umi she would be there. So then how did Umi know about Kayo taking the exams, and why was she acting like it was obvious the two of them would take them together?

Kayo shook her head vigorously in an attempt to get a grip on herself.

Umi's grades were average at best. She'd hardly studied, and even if she'd found out somewhere that Kayo was taking the exams and figured she'd give it a shot, too, there was no way she would get the results she wanted. Namiyama Middle School was one of the top three university-oriented schools in the prefecture. Umi hadn't gone to cram school, nor had she studied for this exam. She'd spent all her time fooling around, so she was bound to fail, and Kayo alone would pass. In which case, there would be no problem.

In the end, both of them passed. Umi bragged that she'd stayed awake for three days to cram, but had she actually managed to pass just by doing that? Once Kayo started at her new school, she heard rumors that the Shibahara family was one of the biggest landowners in the area and that they'd donated a large sum to the school.

Kayo couldn't withdraw her entrance now. She felt certain that even if she did, Umi would continue to pursue her anyway. She didn't know why Umi was so interested in her. It wasn't as if she enjoyed violence, and she wasn't particularly bold. Physically, she was extremely average. She couldn't squeeze an adult's wrist in one hand until their bones fractured, like Umi could.

No matter how Kayo struggled, she couldn't escape. So Kayo resigned herself and accepted it.

She couldn't oppose Umi. Everything went just as Umi wanted it. They even ended up becoming magical girls, something that fundamentally shouldn't even exist. It happened because Umi wanted it. No matter how Kayo rejected the idea, no matter how she insisted there was no way something like this could be real,

nobody would listen to her. When Umi stirred them all up, urging them all to work together and beat the evil mages, everyone followed her. Umi could be dealing with the class rep or a teacher or the fairy who'd given them their power; it didn't matter to her. She was the neighborhood bully, and no matter what sort of authority or benefactor someone was to her, if she didn't like them, she would punch them and move on.

Kayo had thought that maybe things would change a little, once she became a magical girl. But they didn't.

Even among magical girls, Umi's—Captain Grace's—strength was a cut above.

First of all, she was fantastically strong. She was clearly much more capable than even other magical girls, and Funny Trick, Kayo's magical-girl form, was not at all weak. She may have been strongest, after Captain Grace. But as long as Captain Grace was there, she would never be first. And what was more, she swung around that weapon she'd only acquired that very day to her heart's content and made good use of her magic pirate ship and the equipment in it.

Even as a magical girl, the combat experience and fighting spirit Umi had cultivated through many years of violent incidents were useful to Captain Grace. She always stood in the front line to fight their enemies, facing even that formidable Bunny Ears girl without any timidity at all, ignoring the bleeding of her injury, giving chase when Bunny Ears ran away. Kayo grew even more resigned as she watched her go. There was nothing she could do about that creature. It wasn't as if getting magical powers would change her fundamental nature. In fact, she got the feeling that those powers had made her nature all the more apparent.

Following this, Captain Grace also fought with the mysterious black sphere and beat it. She took some hits and shed some blood, and her limbs were streaked with it. Without Funny Trick's support, it would have been close. But though it couldn't have been anything you could call an easy victory, Grace looked like she was having fun. She didn't look at all tired as she immediately headed out to the next fight. Seeing this exasperated Funny Trick, as she was sure Grace would never stop moving until she was dead.

Was it because of the amazing endurance magical girls had or their superior powers of recovery? Or was it due to Umi's own

inborn nature? Captain Grace didn't see her injuries as such, treating her wounds as nothing more than mere scratches as she wandered about in search of even more foes.

Funny Trick couldn't understand any of it. She couldn't understand that enemy who spoke in a foreign language. She couldn't understand it when Umi was attacked by that black corroding stuff, got half her head erased, and then fell. She couldn't understand why it had all ended up like this.

Still dazed, Funny Trick was tied up and taken somewhere, where an ally of the magical girl who had killed Umi told her, "That pirate's death brought you joy."

In less than the time it took to blink, her brain, which had been refusing to work at all, was set ablaze. She was tortured by a fever hot enough to fry her brain as she screamed and denied it.

She hadn't been glad about it. She hadn't been there out of joy. She'd been frozen, unable to accept the fact that Umi Shibahara, the girl she'd always wished would go away, was dying so easily before her eyes as she squeezed Umi's hand in hers.

Umi couldn't die here. How could that monster die in a place like this?

Kayo screamed and wailed, and the fencer threw a plate at her, so she shut her mouth.

Inside her heart, she was going berserk, while simultaneously, it was all starting to converge on one point. She would absolutely not forgive these magical girls. She would make them pay an appropriate price. They had denigrated the whole of Kayo's life. In everything, Umi had always been there. So many times, she had felt Umi was an aggravating, bothersome pain in her ass and wished her gone. Umi had taken her into crises and put her in danger but still smiled boldly to say, "That was fun, huh?" Hanging around with Umi made people think of Kayo as nothing more than an errand girl, Umi's attendant, treated as an accessory, and some would talk dirt about her behind her back, and though Umi silenced those people with violence, and eventually, no more people were reckless enough to say anything bad about her, nobody but Umi would ever hang out with Kayo anymore, either. Every day, she'd thought, if only Umi were gone, maybe she would've had lots of friends.

Umi had been an arrogant, tyrannical egotist who figured all she needed was to have a good time. Kayo had hated her and wished she would go away, but somewhere in her heart, she really

had admired her.

Funny Trick clenched her teeth, hard. Now Umi was dead, and these people had killed her.

The patchwork magical girl was eating her ham with gusto.

The fencer was speaking with the fortune-teller in a foreign language. Weddin was at the fencer's side, waiting on her.

It seemed the fortune-teller was trying to rebuke the fencer.

The one making those sizzling oil sounds in the kitchen had to be the guitarist.

Nobody was looking at Funny Trick. Their eyes were not on her but on Bunny Ears, who was similarly tied up on the floor. The fencer and the fortune-teller both approached Bunny Ears with the sort of respect you showed an opponent you had to be careful with. Compared to her, Funny Trick didn't matter. They figured they could just leave her alone.

Umi had always said, "If they underestimate me, that's good for me. Morons who play it like they don't even care are easy to punch right in the face."

Funny Trick heard herself swallowing her own spit. If they thought she was nothing, that would make the job easier—or it should.

A magical girl's appearance had some connection to her abilities and nature. There had been no exceptions to this among the various girls Funny Trick had encountered thus far. The rabbit was canny and fast. The fencer and the pirate were good at sword fighting. The lamp genie flew through the air.

So then what could a stage magician do?

Once more, Funny Trick made sure nobody was paying attention to her and then firmly arched her back. She passed her head through the loop of her bound arms, and then, arching like a reversed shrimp, she touched her wrists and ankles behind her, then bent back in the opposite direction to touch her wrists and ankles in front. She twisted her wrists experimentally. The rope was firm and tight, but there was a bit of slack, just enough to create room to move her wrists a little.

She quickly returned to her original position, slumped languidly on the floor. The patchwork girl was engrossed in her meal, the fencer and the fortune-teller were deep in conversation, the guitarist was still out of the room, and Weddin was zoned out. Nobody was looking at Funny Trick.

Obviously, a stage magician could escape from rope, at least. Funny Trick's joints were flexible and could move around quite freely. But even if she were to escape from here, she wouldn't get anywhere. She'd just get caught right away. She had to choose the right moment, somehow, and hit the enemy hard when she did it.

Recalling that Umi had once said, "When you're in trouble, your biggest opportunities are waiting for you," Funny Trick stirred a little.

☆ Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: thirteen hours, thirty minutes)

It wasn't that hard to obtain people's personal information. If you ignored the law, didn't mind trying some slightly sketchy things, and topped it off with some violence, it was startlingly easy.

First, Frederica had Weddin guide them to Namiyama Middle School so they could break in. She had Weddin and Pukin wait inside their car, parked in front of the school gates, and left Tot Pop there as well to keep an eye on them while Sonia and Frederica headed in. Sonia disintegrated the lock on the staff entrance, and using a rough sketch as her guide, Frederica ransacked the lockers and the teachers' office. Even if there was no night-duty teacher doing rounds, the school would have a contracted security company, so they should assume it was already known that they had broken in. Frederica could deal with ten or twenty security guards by herself and have change to spare, but it was best to keep the ruckus to a minimum.

Sonia's original calling had been a highwayman, so she was used to figuring out what was good to grab and quickly gathering it together. Frederica had experience as a sneak thief, gathering hair. Sonia snatched up all the documents that seemed relevant and hauled them away, while Frederica harvested whatever fallen hairs caught her eye. The two experts finished up their work in five minutes, then returned to where the car was parked at the front gates and set off.

The homeroom teacher of class 2-A was Nozomi Himeno—Kuru-Kuru Hime. They would go for her first, since she was easier to research than the students. This would be easiest if Frederica

could get ahold of some of her hair, but Nozomi Himeno's hair was not among the strands she'd managed to acquire at the school. When Frederica went over the gathered tresses, she discovered it was all from men but wrapped it all away in a slip of paper, just in case.

Nozomi Himeno's home address was not written on any of the documents Sonia had gathered, either. But there was some kind of page of contacts. This sheet of paper had names that looked like those of teachers as well as phone numbers printed on it. It seemed they didn't guard teachers' private information as closely as that of students.

This was how Frederica acquired Nozomi Himeno's phone number, and then she looked up the number in the directory to get her address. Fortunately, the home phone number of one Miss Himeno was written there.

Frederica told the address to Weddin and asked her to show the way. Checking against the city map they got from the school, they made it to Nozomi Himeno's house, where, just as always, they made Sonia break in, and then they killed the elderly man who was there before he could make too much noise. Now, she just had to fish around the place.

Weddin had said that Himeno was young, still in her twenties. The man Pukin had killed had been rather old to be her husband. He must have been her father. There were two kinds of hair inside the house: those belonging to that man and those of a young woman. It must have been just the two of them living there.

Frederica left the house, tucking only the woman's hair into her slip of paper. With this hair, she could find where Himeno was right now.

☆ Ripple (Time remaining: thirteen hours, eleven minutes)

"What's this…?"

"Oh, you use it like this." Mana turned away from Ripple, toward the wall. She raised the painted-black wooden stick in her right hand, muttered the few words of an incantation and made a sign with her left, and the stick fired a tiny flame out like a bullet. It was about thumb-sized, and it hit the sink, leaving a black scorch mark. Neither its power not its speed seemed like something to

count on.

As Ripple looked at the staff, these thoughts in mind, Mana turned back to her, a disgruntled pout on her face. “You were just thinking, *oh, is that it?* weren’t you? I’ve just turned down the power for indoor use, you know. If you turn it up to max, it’s enough to burn a magical girl.”

“…I wasn’t.” Ripple wondered if Mana had read her mind, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. Ripple didn’t believe her manner had given away her thoughts, so Mana must also have been aware that this weapon was nothing much and had been anticipating that reaction.

Ripple’s friend, the magical girl Snow White, could read minds. Recalling the conversations they had, she cracked a little smile but then noticed Mana glaring at her and stiffened her expression. “… Pardon me.”

“Hmph. It’s fine. It *is* a shabby weapon. You magical girls could throw harder and faster with your bare hands. But…” Mana adjusted her glasses and shot Ripple a look. “Don’t underestimate it.”

“…All right.”

“Respect it.”

“…All right.”

“Okay, so listen up. I’ll explain the next thing to you.”

They’d taken up quite a bit of time with all the detail-hashing, yelling, attempts at calming, and begging that had gone on during their discussion to decide what they would do. Afterward, they’d had to slow down to Mana’s human speed when moving to a new location, which had also been fairly time-consuming. Meanwhile, the clock was ticking, and the moment when the barrier would be undone loomed. Ripple checked the time on her magical phone. At this point, that was all the device was good for.

Ripple, Mana, 7753, and Kuru-Kuru Hime had all left the rooftop that had been their designated meeting spot for emergencies to go hide in a seemingly abandoned private residence located about ten minutes away on foot. It was an old bungalow, about 550 square feet, and had no yard. There was a garage, but it was really rusted up, and it required magical girl–level strength just to raise or lower the door.

The interior was scattered with blue plastic sheets, empty instant ramen cups, bottles of *shochu*, and other junk, and a sour

odor wafted around. The tatami were terribly rotten—so much so that you'd sink into them unpleasantly if you sat down.

It seemed someone did live here—be that legally or not. They'd found traces of occupancy, but no one was around.

"It's probably just a squatter anyway," said Mana. "They won't show up when there's more of us. If they come to complain about us, just wave them off."

"…All right."

7753 had said that Pukin's magic could control minds. Ripple was surprised and impressed at how informed 7753 was, thinking, *I suppose she's capable, after all.* It was quite possible that she feigned timidity as she observed their activities during critical situations. *I'll have to be careful*, thought Ripple.

If Hana or Archfiend Pam fell under Pukin's mind-control magic, then their emergency meetup location would be leaked to the enemy. They could just end up standing around waiting for the enemy to attack. So they moved their headquarters.

Mana had entrusted the telescope she'd pulled out of her magic bag to 7753, who was spying through the curtains to keep watch on the building roof that had been their previous emergency gathering spot. If Hana or Archfiend Pam arrived—and though Ripple didn't want to think about it much, if the enemy showed up—they would be notified.

Kuru-Kuru Hime was back in her human form, turned away from the group to use her smartphone. As she had said herself, the fact that she was a magical girl had already been confirmed through 7753's goggles.

Mana was explaining to Ripple about all the items she had on her. Ripple's magic was to throw items with a 100 percent hit rate. At present, all she had were the kunai and shuriken that were accessories to her costume. If there were other magical weapons for her use, those could be more powerful, which would be convenient. So Ripple had told Mana that if she had anything appropriate for throwing, she would like Mana to give it to her.

Mana had seemed reluctant but showed her, since this was an emergency situation. "This stick is the staff of fire. You use sigils and incantations to make it shoot flame bullets."

That didn't seem particularly useful.

"I've also got a magic telescope that has X-ray vision, a hat that

amplifies magic power, a magic cape stronger than armor, magic tights that never get runs, and a magical school uniform."

The telescope, stockings, and uniform aside, the hat and cape seemed strong. They were both dark colored, and the hat was a three-cornered pointed hat with a sun-shaped decoration. It was a so-called witch's hat. Ripple's old partner had worn something similar.

"Oh, the hat and cape are for mages," Mana explained, "so they'd just be regular clothes if a magical girl wore them."

So they weren't useful after all. Why had she bothered showing Ripple?

"There's a magic bag into which you can shove as much as you want and pull it out when you want, as long as it's of a size you can carry."

Ripple possessed a similar sack herself. It couldn't be used for combat directly, but it could be useful for stuffing with throwing weapons.

"Sturdy magic rope. It should be hard to tear, even with your magical-girl strength."

Ripple tugged it to test it, and it was pretty sturdy. At the very least, Ripple couldn't tear it with her own might. It was about fifty feet long—not long enough to weave into a casting net—but if she were to put a weight on it, it could make a capturing tool to tangle around someone's legs, at least.

"And these." Mana rolled out a smooth sphere about two inches wide, with a metal fitting that looked like a lever. Ripple had seen similar objects before—or rather, she'd had them thrown at her before.

"…A grenade?"

"No, it's a smoke bomb. I'd need permission from the section manager to take lethal weapons like grenades. If I'm going to withdraw something under my authority as team leader, smoke bombs are best."

In order for Ripple to use her magic effectively, she had to see where she was throwing. She was fairly accurate if she just threw in the general direction, but ultimately, that was just "fairly accurate." Her magic wasn't very compatible with smoke bombs, since they would block her vision.

Whatever she thought of Ripple, who was staring at the smoke bomb in her palm, Mana pouted. "You think smoke bombs are

worthless, don't you?"

"No, nothing like that…"

"You've been like that the whole time. You're undervaluing these weapons as dull. You're not being constructive at all, not even trying to work something out with what we have on hand. Nothing but complaints with you."

"No…"

"It doesn't just spit out smoke. There's a little explosion when it goes off. It's powerful enough that if you were to hold it in your hand, your fingers would fly off."

As far as Ripple knew, no enemy would be so kind as to pick up a ball that for all appearances was so obviously a grenade. Perhaps if she were to time the explosion and throw it at the enemy… But she figured it would be difficult to time the explosion of a weapon she'd only just now seen for the first time. Worst case, Ripple would get her own fingers blown off.

"And these." Mana pulled out a pack of ten syringes with attached finger grips. It included ampoules full of dark-green liquid, as well as glass bottles packed with round white tablets. "These tablets stabilize the mind and numb physical pain. The ampoules are used as a set with the syringes to temporarily amplify physical abilities. Using too much will have side effects and aftereffects and such. Neither of these can be used by magical girls, since this medicine is used to gain the physical prowess and mental strength of a magical girl."

As medical equipment, the syringes were not made for throwing or stabbing. Considering how delicate they likely were, it would be hard to use them in combat.

"Oh, and the car. There's magic in the car we've been using."

There was no way Ripple could throw the car.

"So was there anything in here you could use?"

"I'll take the rope."

"What about the smoke grenades?"

"…And one of those, too."

Mana seemed quite triumphant for whatever reason as she watched Ripple tuck a smoke bomb into her sleeve pocket.

Ripple felt morose. It was completely obvious Mana was using showing off her items as a distraction to avoid worrying about Hana.

Mana was stubborn and self-important. She would never forgive

anyone who humiliated her, she equated loss with death, and her pride was connected to her occupational ethics. She hated being looked down on and hated people to begin with, too, but she was forced to deal with them in order to get by. She was also moody in the sense that, if something happened that she couldn't tolerate, she would lash out thoughtlessly but regret it afterward and make a token effort of kindness toward the victim of her temper. Then she would rationalize this in her mind, thinking, *What's wrong with humiliating someone who humiliated me?*

Ripple had been the same way a few years ago. Having her old self shoved in her face like this felt unbearable. But seeing how Mana expressed her feelings for Hana, she thought maybe Mana was more honest with her feelings than Ripple had once been. That made Ripple want Hana to come back safe. 7753 had mentioned the escaped prisoners were especially dangerous enemies, and what's more, among them was a magical girl Ripple had once fought herself.

Pythie Frederica.

If Calamity Mary, who had slaughtered passing civilians, was villainous scum, and Cranberry, Musician of the Forest, who had taken out her dissatisfaction with standard examinations on unknowing examinees, was disastrous scum, then Pythie Frederica was the worst scum of all. Ripple had never wanted to run into her, ever again. Ripple had been aware that the Magical Kingdom's observational system for magical girls was full of holes, but they had to do a decent job with their prisons, at least. Rather than letting scum like that run loose in the world again, it would be better to have no prisons at all. One-shot out—execution—was enough.

Ripple prayed that Hana was safe and not captured or killed by Pythie. After a moment's pause, she prayed for Archfiend Pam's safety, too.

I paused for a moment because they said Archfiend Pam was really strong, she thought, then laughed at herself, since the thought sounded like an excuse she was trying to make to someone. Apparently, Archfiend Pam had been Cranberry's teacher. Ripple had never faced Cranberry directly, but of course, she harbored no fond feelings for her. Lots of people had died at her hand. Ripple, who had survived, had lost an arm and an eye, and Snow White had suffered injuries beyond losing body parts.

Ripple figured it might be wrong to place the blame on Pam all because she was Cranberry's master, but she also thought that maybe if Pam had taught Cranberry a little better, things would have turned out differently. She also kind of wanted Pam to tell her about what kind of magical girl her master had been, though she also doubted such knowledge would change anything.

Ripple ran her finger along the rotten flooring, pulled out a tuft of the tatami, and blew it away. She felt like these were terribly birdbrained thoughts to have, and once more, she prayed for Hana and Archfiend Pam's safety.

☆ Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: twelve hours, ten minutes)

Kuru-Kuru Hime realized something.

For some reason, she couldn't use her magical phone. Ripple and the others said they couldn't use theirs anymore, either. So what about using her normal cell phone? She detransformed, returning to Nozomi Himeno, and pulled her smartphone out from her coat pocket. She called the time to test it out and found it did, in fact, tell it to her.

If she could use her cell phone, then that meant two cell phones could make contact.

It seemed Ripple and her allies had not brought any other methods of contact but magical phones to begin with. But this wasn't the case for Nozomi's group, since they hadn't even known the term "magical phone" until ten hours ago. The school rule of no cell phones was famously not enforced, and the majority of students secretly carried them. This was an open secret that even the teachers were aware of. So if any one of them who had phones could be contacted…

Nozomi had lots of things to tell them.

That she was safe.

That Toko was suspect.

That the people they'd taken to be enemies, the ones they'd been fighting, didn't seem to be all that bad. When Ripple had suddenly grabbed her by the lapels, Kuru-Kuru Hime had frozen up and wondered what was happening to her. But once they talked, she discovered Ripple was not a bad person at all. In fact, it seemed

she was on the side of those trying to get the bad guys under control. Mana had a temper, 7753 was jumpy, and Ripple was curt, but they seemed more trustworthy than that fairy who had twisted her arm and tried to take her students hostage.

She also wanted to tell the others that some serious criminals had escaped from prison to lurk in this city. Also, where she was now. She wanted to join up with the others first thing.

There were things she wanted them to tell her, too. Most of all, she wanted to know that they were safe.

She could use her cell phone to call them, but she didn't know their numbers. Nozomi considered how she might find out and came up with the idea to ask their mutual connections. The kids would have friends, and those friends should know their numbers.

She would get the address list for the students in class 2-A, which was at her house, and contact the kids from class A to see if anyone knew the cell numbers of Mine Musubiya in class D, Kayo Nemura and Umi Shibahara in class C, or the first-years, Tatsuko Sakaki and Kaori Ninotsugi. Normally, calling students at this hour was out of the question, but now was not the time for reservations. The students' lives and her own life were hanging in the balance.

Nozomi called home. The sky was starting to grow light.

Her fingertips trembled, and she couldn't dial the numbers right. She pressed her hand against her chest. Putting her phone down on the tatami, she held her right hand in her left to stop the trembling and carefully pushed each number one by one. It rang.

Mana and Ripple were both looking at her. 7753 put down her telescope, too, turning around to look, until Mana glared at her, and she quickly returned to her earlier position. Nozomi counted the rings, and after fifteen tones, it connected to the voice mail service and hung up. She called one more time, but it connected to voice mail, just as before.

No one was picking up. Her father was at home, probably sleeping, but he wasn't at all a deep sleeper. He'd woken up over a level-two earthquake more than a few times, coming to knock on the door to Nozomi's room when she was still fast asleep. Every time there was an earthquake at night, he'd worried about Nozomi, who slept like a rock. Her father wasn't only sensitive to vibrations but to noises as well. He was the one to take emergency calls at night, because Nozomi wouldn't wake up.

Did I call the wrong number? she wondered, rattled. She could

have easily misdialed a number when it was a full ten digits, including the area code. Oh, wait—she didn't have to dial in the whole number. It was registered in her phone. She always just went for autodial when she called home, so why had she dialed up the number when she didn't have to?

Her chest hurt so much she felt like it would explode from the inside. No matter how Nozomi tried to restrain the pounding, it wouldn't settle. She could even feel nausea welling up inside her. Nozomi withdrew her hand from her phone and transformed into a magical girl. Her heartbeat quieted. The unbearable pain in her chest calmed. It seemed Toko hadn't been lying when she explained how turning into a magical girl made you mentally stronger.

From the list of registered numbers, Kuru-Kuru Hime selected HOME and pushed it. The phone rang fifteen times, then connected to voice mail. She hugged her phone to her chest. She didn't understand why her father wasn't answering the phone. Unease built inside her.

Suddenly, she felt a shock. It hit her in the chest, knocking her over onto her back. Ripple had pushed her down. Kuru-Kuru Hime couldn't understand what had happened, and before she could shoot out any ribbon, Ripple spun around and threw a kunai. A hand floating in the air disappeared right before the kunai hit it, and without a target, the kunai stuck in the ceiling, sending dust pattering down.

"That's Pythie Frederica's magic! She has hair from one of us!" Ripple yelled.

7753's trembling voice followed with, "There's a red car coming straight for us!"

☆ **Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: eleven hours, fifty minutes)**

She'd forgotten Ripple was there.

Ripple knew all about Frederica's magic. After all, she'd fought with her before. Despite nothing being around her, Ripple would always stay cautious, even indoors. She had reacted instantly when that hand had appeared out of thin air.

It was all because of Kuru-Kuru Hime's hair. It had been so beautiful as Frederica had looked down on it from behind, she

couldn't help but reach out to it. The adorably styled ringlets in her hair were so gorgeous that even inside that run-down old shack, they had stimulated Frederica's appetites of the flesh.

But still, she'd resisted the urge once. Frederica checked in the room, seeing the number of people occupying it, and found 7753 from Magical Girl Resources, and just as Hana had said, there was Mana, too. A smirk blossomed on Frederica's face when she spotted Ripple. Though magical girls didn't physically age, Ripple now looked more intense. She'd lost her former naïveté—and to good effect. Frederica could see no useless pride or stubbornness in her. She'd become flexible. Even now that she'd fled from her enemies to cram with her allies into an abandoned building, she wasn't getting emotional, and she moved with grace and softness.

Frederica had resisted temptation the second time she saw them, too. When she told Weddin she could see a tall building out the window, Weddin replied with the general area that building might be in, and they'd sped off in that direction in their car.

The third time, Frederica had been unable to resist. They were able to triangulate the building's location from a street sign and the placard of a candy shop visible from the window of the abandoned building where their targets were hiding. The moment before their arrival, Frederica reached her hand out, and Ripple responded immediately. Frederica just barely avoided getting skewered. If her wrist had been stabbed during her distance manipulation, she wouldn't have been able to retract her arm, which would have handicapped her terribly. The last time that had happened, her ankle had been seriously wounded as well, and literally unable to lay even a finger on her opponent, she'd been beaten to a pulp.

I refuse to let that happen again.

She wavered for a moment but then decided this was something she should be honest about. "I'm sorry. I tried to attack them but failed."

"Oh-ho. Then it seems this foe is not to be underestimated," said Pukin.

"There." Weddin pointed ahead. A compact car broke through the garage door to flee the scene. Its windows were all gray, and Frederica couldn't see into it. The windows weren't tinted, but rather, the inside of the car was filled with something. It made a sharp turn, practically drifting, then raced straight down the road.

Frederica looked at her crystal ball. Her vision was entirely

blocked by gray—it appeared to be a smoke screen of some kind. Ripple had probably given the orders to block Frederica's view. *But now they're in trouble, too, being inside that smoke screen*, thought Frederica with a chuckle. Her crystal ball couldn't transmit sound, but she could practically hear them coughing and spluttering. Ripple was bound to suck it up, though.

"Well then, why don't we have ourselves a game of tag?" Frederica suggested.

Pukin smiled. "A car chase would be a fine diversion! We've always wanted to give one a go!"

Frederica didn't think they had to bother chasing down this car, but she also figured it was best to let Pukin do what she wanted—especially since she'd just screwed up. Arguing at this point would only sour Pukin's mood.

"Can you do a car chase?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Tot's not so bad at this sorta thing, y'know."

At a glance, a car chase seemed like a good time, but Frederica considered where issues might come up. If Ripple were to attack the car tires with her projectiles, they would have a hard time dodging. "Please make sure we can abandon the vehicle if needed. This car isn't as sturdy as we are. I doubt it will hold up if it's hit by an enemy attack."

"So be it."

"Right."

"Roger!"

Gray smoke rose out from the cracks of the car windows. Even more smoke lingered within, and they couldn't see through the rear window to what was going on inside. Ripple and the others had to be hobbling themselves by prioritizing blocking Frederica's vision.

Frederica's party was struggling a bit, too. She tapped her right middle finger on her temple. Was there nothing else she should be considering? Following Pukin's whims was amusing enough, but this also meant Frederica had that many more things to take into consideration.

It turned out she didn't have to worry about Tot Pop's driving skills. She drove well—if too fast. What about vehicle performance? Compared to this car, the Fury was faster, even if it was an older vehicle. However, they had a lot of people crammed in there: Tot Pop in the driver's seat, Frederica riding shotgun, and Pukin crammed in the middle back seat, Weddin leaning coquettishly

against her.

And then there was Sonia, sitting and holding Hana, who was completely tied up and blindfolded and even had her ears covered. If Hana knew the general position of her target, then she would use her magic on them. Only by covering her eyes with a magic blindfold that didn't let any light through and using magic earmuffs that didn't let any sound through could they finally lug her around. What's more, Frederica had also explained explicitly to Sonia that if Hana did anything funny, she was to kill her immediately, and she had ensured Hana heard this as well. Hana's magic could disable an opponent but was not suited to anything lethal. So Frederica had informed Hana that if she were to use her magic on Sonia when she couldn't even resolve her fundamental quandary, she would die for nothing.

Hana had that much value as a hostage to use against the inspection team. They had a strong sense of group unity, and that meant they cared for their allies.

Funny Trick lay on the floor of the back seat. She was tied up with her hands behind her back but was treated with less care—the reality of the difference in treatment between an amateur and an expert expressed most plainly.

In total, there were seven magical girls in one car, and although it was a large one, this many occupants made things a bit cramped. The faint, sweet smell of each person's breath mingled in the air, filling the vehicle. Frederica inhaled deeply through her nose, her lungs filling with the scent along with sheer bliss, then slowly breathed out again.

They were gradually approaching the other car. As long as they weren't competing over tight turns or fuel consumption, they would naturally catch up. The other car was not venturing into back roads and seemed to choose major avenues as it raced along.

Wait. Deliberately *choosing major roads?*

If they're going to flee, couldn't there be a better way for them to do it? As soon as the thought crossed Frederica's mind, the compact car, speeding down the middle of the four-lane highway at over sixty miles per hour, suddenly crashed.

Before she could even think about what had just happened, her body moved. Pukin, Sonia, and Frederica all acted at once, kicking open the doors or breaking the window glass from the inside to jump out. Tot Pop moved a heartbeat behind the others, holding on

to the wheel in the driver's seat until the very last minute.

The Fury swerved to avoid the crushed vehicle and plunged into the shoulder of the road. It crashed right into a telephone pole, snapping it in half and crushing a vending machine, before finally coming to a stop as it hit the flank of a thick gatepost. American cars were just more sturdily made. Even after all of that, it still maintained its original shape.

All the occupants aside from Tot Pop had leaped out the sides of the car and were fine. Since Tot Pop had turned the car before leaping out, she was tossed toward the compact car. She sandwiched her guitar between her body and the vehicle, hit something invisible with a heavy crash, and went flying once again. That was when Frederica finally remembered: the barrier.

Frederica put her crystal ball away inside her skirt and approached Tot Pop. She grabbed her by her sides and lifted her up. She didn't seem to be injured. "Are you all right?"

"Just barely okay…I guess." Tot Pop was staggering but could stand on her feet even without support. She patted the dirt off her guitar, sighed, and grumbled, "What a mess."

Sonia tossed Hana down onto the road and approached the wreckage. She put her hand on its body, corroded it until it turned black, and peeled it off. All that came out was smoke—there was no one inside.

"…It was remote controlled?" Frederica murmured.

"Master, they lured us here, didn't they?"

Pukin looked over at Frederica, who was beside Weddin. It seemed when she'd busted out of the car, she'd grabbed the girl by the collar or something to escape together. "Just what is going on?"

Frederica could tell from Pukin's expression that she was in a less than favorable mood. The original cause of this situation was her choice to engage in a car chase to appease Pukin's whim, but if Frederica were to point that out, Pukin's already sour mood was bound to get worse.

In as apologetic a tone as possible, Frederica replied, "I'm terribly sorry. It seems we've been had."

The barrier here prevented anything magical from passing through. Since the car had suddenly crashed on a road which, at a glance, looked quite empty. That meant the barrier was here and also that the car itself was magical in nature. Their opponents had set this remote-controlled car running off toward the barrier and

escaped while Frederica and company were busy chasing it. They had confused Frederica's magic by setting off two smoke bombs: one in the room, one inside the car. *That's quite smart*, Frederica thought, impressed.

"What shall we do now?" Pukin was not in a good mood, after all.

"This is no issue. As long as we have Nozomi Himeno's hair, we can trace their whereabouts."

This trick had ultimately just bought them time. Their own party was all magical girls, while their opponents had Mana, who was not a magical girl, among them. In a game of tag, their own side was superior in both endurance and speed.

Frederica was about to pull out her crystal ball again when she noticed something wasn't right. She ran her finger under her skirt, and then when her finger touched the belt where her crystal ball was supposed to be, she confirmed her suspicion. What she pulled out from under her skirt was not her crystal ball. It was a fist-sized rock.

Frederica approached the smoking Fury. All four of its doors were open. Of course they were—everyone had escaped. Frederica peered inside the car.

What on earth…?

The rope was just lying in there. It hadn't been cut or torn up. It was as it had been, knots included.

Funny Trick, who should have been tied up there, was gone.

The crystal ball, which should have been tucked under her skirt, was also gone. Funny Trick may have been able to use her magic to switch the two items.

"Frederica! Whatever is the matter?" Pukin cried.

☆ Postarie (Time remaining: eleven hours, thirty-eight minutes)

Tatsuko Sakaki was a truly, hopelessly withdrawn coward, down to the very depths of her soul. She was scared to talk to anyone outside her own family. The more she thought about how she didn't want people to hate her, the more her lips would falter; she'd get tongue-tied, her voice would grow quieter, she would get harder to hear; then she would start stuttering, too, and whoever she was

talking to would respond with disappointment or anger or taunts before finally leaving.

She had been like that since before she could even remember. When the other children had gathered to play tag, she'd merely watched them but never tried to approach. When others had come to tug on her hand, trying to get her to play together, they would see her uneasy, shy squirming and, gradually, had stopped inviting her.

The preschool had called her parents about her behavior every day out of concern. But Tatsuko wasn't averse to preschool, and she could talk normally enough with her parents and seemed to enjoy chatting about her day. So her mother and father concluded that since she didn't appear to hate school itself, things should be okay. Based on their own experiences, Tatsuko's parents decided that although she might be alone right now, it wasn't as if she'd never make any friends.

Tatsuko's parents were naive. Some people just couldn't make friends.

Until kindergarten, just being adrift from the group was as bad as it got, but once she was in elementary school, she found her classmates had formed a tiny society—one that Tatsuko was alien to.

Since all it took was someone talking to her to leave Tatsuko stuttering, it wasn't long before she became the subject of ridicule within the class. They would giggle at her, stick signs on her back, and throw erasers at her in class. Such mild pranks happened practically every day.

With each passing grade, the mischief escalated, bit by bit. It turned into the sort of minute harassment that teachers wouldn't find out about: She would be kicked in her backpack from behind, or her pencils and textbooks would be hidden. Tatsuko was seen as a rank lower within the social hierarchy, and so no one held back when dealing with her.

She moved on to a private middle school and used the most important period of the new semester, April, on herself. She never spoke with anyone, and all she did was read books or manga as the social relationships within the class were established. As expected, she ended up alone.

She'd heard that bullying in middle school was far nastier than in elementary school, so to defend herself, she started gathering

information. She would make search after search, refining results, tracking down her classmates' social media accounts, and she would check those accounts twice a day, morning and evening. She would also check the entries of those classmates who had blogs or websites once a day, looking to see if there were any *"let's bully Tatsuko"* trends. There was nobody in the position to advise Tatsuko that she was investing her efforts in entirely the wrong direction.

Tatsuko never came up in their conversations. Every day, she was disappointed but also relieved. Maybe it was because this was a private school. The teachers and students were classier—or rather, quieter, and it didn't seem there was any talk of wanting to bully people, even in other classes in her grade year. But still, checking the Internet had become part of her routine, so she kept doing it—and then it was June.

That month, Tatsuko made the first friend in her life.

"Hey, you were reading that manga before, weren't you?"

She'd assumed they weren't talking to her. The classroom was hardly ever quiet at lunch hour, but generally, no one would ever talk to Tatsuko.

Though she still didn't perceive it as someone talking to her, the voice had been close, so she lifted her head. When students nearby were chattering, it was hard to read, even more so when other girls did the chattering. Tatsuko's eyes left the page and turned toward the voice to see someone's face very close to her and looking straight in her direction. Tatsuko recoiled and just about fell from her chair.

"I like that one, too." Whether or not the girl noticed Tatsuko freaking out so much she'd clung to her desk, she smiled as if nothing at all had happened.

Tatsuko panicked, then made it worse and started acting weird. As she was freaking out, the bell rang, signaling that break was over, and the other girl returned to her seat.

With math class going in one ear and out the other, Tatsuko thought about what had just happened.

It wasn't as if she had no interest in her classmates. She was more wary than interested, but she was careful to the degree that she would check class rumors and mutterings online.

Kaori Ninotsugi; it was a strange name. She was about an average student, and she didn't stand out all that much athletically, nor was she exceptional in music or home economics. Kaori wasn't

particularly pretty, but she wasn't exceedingly ugly, either. Basically, she was average. You could call her cautious; you could say nothing about her really stood out. She was essentially like "Classmate D."

Of course, unlike Tatsuko, she had friends. She seemed to enjoy herself during break time, and other girls would always accompany her to the bathroom. In gym class, she never got skipped over when kids picked teams, and she never paired with the teacher during stretching exercises.

—Friends.

Maybe this was one of those "opportunities to become friends." People who weren't Tatsuko would use these sorts of opportunities to "make friends." Even if Tatsuko couldn't come up with quick, witty responses, if she could just respond a little better, maybe she could have made a friend, too.

But oh well. It'd just be a bother anyway.

Coming to the conclusion that she was fine with her life this way, Tatsuko turned her attention to the math class.

But it didn't end there.

After that day, Kaori started proactively coming to talk to Tatsuko. From Tatsuko's perspective, this was beyond what she could take. It felt less like this girl was talking to her and more like she was being dragged into an altercation. Her actions came across more like some scrappy kid bumping into your shoulder and making it out to be your fault.

She tried to force Tatsuko into her group of friends. *Give me a break!* Tatsuko thought. *Leave me alone! I'm fine by myself!* But despite all these thoughts, of course she couldn't say any of this out loud.

Tatsuko assumed the girls would chatter on about this new lipstick or some model's clothing or things of that nature, but contrary to her expectations, Kaori and her cheery friends enjoyed talking about anime and manga.

The classmates that had until now seemed to Tatsuko to be the terribly glamorous residents of another world were, once she actually tried talking to them, actually the sort who just did things like wear cute socks with little embroidery detailing, or shape their eyebrows with tweezers, or use fruity lip balm to make their lips shine—attempts to be fashionable without crossing the line where scary teachers would get mad at them for it.

Though clumsily, Tatsuko gradually started joining in on conversations, and before she knew it, she was saying hello to the others and being the one to greet them and getting called by a nickname.

Though she'd thought this would never be a part of her life, now that it was done, it was simple. And she would always be grateful to Kaori, who had started it all for her.

Even now, Kaori was by Tatsuko's side as they followed Archfiend Pam. Maybe it was more accurate to say that Tatsuko was with Kaori. Kaori wanted to continue being the magical girl Rain Pow. Tatsuko didn't mind quitting being Postarie. Getting back to her safe life was more important to her than being a magical girl. They still disagreed on this, but they remained together despite that because Tatsuko couldn't abandon Kaori.

She really wanted to discuss this with Rain Pow, but whenever she tried, she was met with a slap in the face from Archfiend Pam.

Judging from how Toko never came out of hiding, Postarie understood that she must have been Archfiend Pam's enemy. But even knowing this, she didn't get the feeling that Archfiend Pam was one of those evil mages Toko had talked about. Pam was clearly an unpleasant person to deal with. The way she dealt with people by hitting them and then criticizing them was frightening, and sometimes what she said afterward was even crueler than the physical abuse itself. But even so, Postarie thought perhaps that wasn't the same thing as evil. A really passionate and intense gym teacher could be someone you didn't like and yet not be a bad person. Archfiend Pam didn't seem like a bad person, either. She spoke with such self-righteousness, and Postarie doubted the stuff she talked about—like battles between magical girls—would be of much use to either her or Rain Pow. But she still got the feeling that Pam was more or less saying it with consideration for them in mind.

And besides, Postarie felt like Pam was showing them consideration, too, in ways that were less explicit. Before, she'd been walking so quickly, it had been the most Postarie could do to keep up, but now she'd slowed her pace. Not knowing what the coats Archfiend Pam had given them were made of had been frightening, but when Postarie actually pushed her arms through the sleeves, she found the coat fit perfectly and was warm. It made her feel safe, like things would be okay if she wore this coat.

From behind, Postarie couldn't read what Archfiend Pam, striding ahead of them, had on her mind. *She walks so brazenly*, thought Postarie. People with confidence and clear consciences could walk like that. As a person, Pam seemed like the polar opposite of Postarie.

Postarie glanced at Rain Pow beside her. She looked bored.

The thought crossed Postarie's mind that it might be better to tell Pam about everything, including Toko. But Rain Pow wouldn't want that. In the end, their discussion never got anywhere, and still without reaching a conclusion, the two of them walked side by side.

What do I do? What should I do? Postarie worried.

That was when Archfiend Pam's feet stopped. "What…?" she muttered, turning her gaze into the distance. "A car accident…?"

Just what the heck was Archfiend Pam doing? Postarie was confused by such an incomprehensible remark but nevertheless hesitated, as she was sure that Pam would slap her if she were to ask about it. In the meantime, Archfiend Pam's expression turned to shock.

"There are magical girls there!" Instantly, her dress coat transformed, turning into a black square to rise into the sky. She pulled off her sunglasses and Panama hat to reveal sharp horns on her head.

"One, two, three, four… And Gekokujou… Those bastards."

Postarie was startled—not by the two horns but by the costume under Pam's dress coat. It was so revealing, it would be no exaggeration to describe her as half-naked. It was practically just string and strips of cloth.

"One with a guitar on her back, a fencer, one in a patch-covered costume, a fortune-teller-style magical girl, and one wearing an outfit that looks like a wedding dress… Are any of these girls familiar to you?"

"I think the wedding dress girl is probably our friend Weddin." Rain Pow turned to Postarie for affirmation, saying, "Right?" and Postarie nodded. Their friends were a pirate, a stage magician, an Arabian dancer, a ballerina, and a girl in a wedding dress. The ninja and Bunny Ears were enemies. The magical girls Pam had just described were all ones they had never seen or even heard of.

Archfiend Pam smiled with glee. "So they're strangers to you, too… Interesting."

CHAPTER 9

WITH THE ARCHFIEND AMID THE FLAMES

☆ **Rain Pow (Time remaining: eleven hours, twenty minutes)**

She shaded her eyes with her hand under a graying sky that had not yet fully reached dawn.

Archfiend Pam had transformed the coats she'd loaned to Postarie and Rain Pow back into black wings. Finally released from its tight restraints, Rain Pow was struck with the urge to roll her neck around, but she held back. Any more slaps and her cheeks would be cut open.

Archfiend shoved Postarie and Rain Pow between a building and a row of three vending machines, ordered them to not leave under any circumstances, and flew away.

The moment she didn't have to worry about Archfiend Pam's gaze on her, Toko popped her head out from Rain Pow's shirt. "She said there was an accident, huh?"

"Sounds like it. I couldn't hear it, so I think it happened pretty far away, though."

"I guess she found it with one of those wings she sent flying off."

"Those wings… It looked like she could really change them into just about anything, but could they do that, too?"

"Hey…," Postarie interrupted Toko and Rain Pow. "What are we gonna do?"

"What do you mean, what're we gonna do? About what?"

Postarie shot a glance at Toko, then dropped her tone a bit and continued. "Are we gonna tell Archfiend Pam…everything?"

"No way! You've gotta be kidding me!" Toko flailed her arms

and legs, tickling Rain Pow and making her scrunch up her face, until Rain Pow gently restrained Toko from over her clothing.

"C'mon, Toko, stop flailing around when you're in my shirt."

"Do you get what'll happen if we tell someone like *her* everything? The heck? Are you thinking about selling me out? Are you the sort of magical girl who bites the hand that feeds her, Postarie?"

"I'm not…biting the hand that feeds me… It's just…" Postarie looked down, hesitated just a bit, and instead asked, "Is it true what Archfiend Pam said? That you did something bad, Toko, and they're chasing you down for it?"

Toko's eyebrows flew up, then down. With spread palms, elbows bent, she shrugged her shoulders. "That's 'cause they're bad people. They're just trying to justify their actions while they talk nasty about me. You can't take them seriously. She was slap-slap-slapping your cheeks like crazy, too, right, Postarie? She's the sort of bad person who uses violence to try to keep you in line. But I'm a good fairy, so I don't do that sort of thing."

Still looking down, Postarie closed her mouth. Repeating that no way were they talking to Pam, Toko added, "What we *should* be thinking about now is not following her but running away posthaste. How long are we gonna have to hide out in a place like this?"

"But she told us not to run."

"And why do we have to obey her like good little girls?! C'mon, ignore her. She and those wings of hers are gone, so this is our best shot, right? If we don't escape now, then when will we?"

While Postarie seemed uncertain, for some reason, she didn't back down. Toko opposed her stubbornly, saying that if Archfiend Pam were to find them, who knew what would happen to them.

"What should we do, Kaori?" Postarie asked, tugging on her friend's sleeve.

Toko squirmed inside Rain Pow's shirt, saying, "I'm not wrong here, right?"

With the two of them pressing her for an opinion, Rain Pow closed her eyes for about thirty seconds to contemplate, then offered her opinion.

☆ Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: ten hours, fifty-three minutes)

Their plan to use the vehicle as bait did not go as they'd anticipated. This strategy had been conceived in semidesperation: When the enemy was chasing the vehicle, they would use that as their opportunity to launch a surprise attack from behind. But for some reason, since the enemy nonsensically used their vehicle to chase the other vehicle, the plan changed to using the remote control to make the car crash into the barrier, praying they'd get lucky and the enemy would crash into the barrier, too.

Ripple and the others would have escaped by now. Kuru-Kuru Hime had separated from them. They'd tried to convince her this was too dangerous and she shouldn't go, but she'd ignored them, shaking them off to run by herself in the opposite direction.

Whose hair had Frederica used for her magic? Mana, 7753, and Ripple all said Frederica would have had no opportunity to steal their hair, and Ripple had said she'd confiscated Frederica's original massive collection of magical-girl tresses. In other words, they could assume Frederica had acquired this hair while inside the barrier—so then the most likely one of them was Kuru-Kuru Hime.

So then how had Frederica stolen Kuru-Kuru Hime's hair? Her description said she had a crystal ball, wore a veil with star decorations on it and a long skirt open boldly in the front, and long black hair that flowed down her back to her ankles. Kuru-Kuru Hime did not recall any such person. In other words, she should assume they had never met. So how did someone she had never met have her hair? She had a very bad feeling about this.

Tears in her eyes, Kuru-Kuru Hime had insisted she wanted to check what was going on at home and ended up separating from the others. If Kuru-Kuru Hime was the only one of them being watched by Frederica, if she separated from them, she would no longer burden the others. It was the clearest, most logical option.

Ripple, 7753, and Mana ought to understand. As long as Kuru-Kuru Hime was with them, Frederica would always be watching them. They just didn't say this out of kindness. Even though it would be best for them to sacrifice Kuru-Kuru Hime, whom they'd only just met, they couldn't suggest it. Besides, there was something Kuru-Kuru Hime wanted to do, even if it meant she'd end up alone.

She'd given them her civilian cell phone number. Ripple had advised her to watch her back. If Frederica's hand were to kidnap her, that would be checkmate.

Kuru-Kuru Hime did as Ripple told, keeping an eye out as she

rushed over to the Himeno residence. It wasn't long before she arrived. Returning to human form, she pulled out her house key but immediately discovered she didn't need it. The front door was open, the whole space around it blackened.

Nozomi yelled out something so incoherent even she herself couldn't understand and opened the front door. Seeing red fluid flowing down the hallway to her feet, she let out a scream.

☆ Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: eleven hours, twenty minutes)

Frederica nearly cried out when she saw the magical girl in black who appeared in the sky above them.

Her voluptuous body was covered only in the slightest scraps of cloth. Her long, black, thin tail was pointed like a spearhead at the tip and decorated with a red ribbon. A set of black horns adorned the girl's head. She had crimson eyes, just like Hana Gekokujou, but this girl's were a deeper red. To put it succinctly, they were the kind of eyes that sucked you right in.

And then there were her four black wings, although someone unfamiliar with this girl and her abilities might not see them as such. The four black squares were held in reserve at her back. They floated in the sky, their buoyancy making not just them but the girl float, as well.

It was Archfiend Pam. Her name was well-known even to those who were not magical-girl enthusiasts like Pythie Frederica. She had been master to Cranberry, Musician of the Forest, Frederica's greatest magical-girl obsession, one she had investigated and researched the most. There had been many opportunities for Frederica to speak Pam's name with awe, hate, jealousy, or worship.

Finally, Frederica took note of her hair. It was a dull blond pixie cut that didn't quite reach her shoulders, and her bangs seemed to have a bit of a cowlick to them. Her style was plain, artless, and lacked any sense that she was particular about it.

Frederica heaved a deep sigh. How could such plain, simple, and short hair look so glossy, so vibrant, so sparkly? She wanted to pet it, stroke it, and rub her cheek against it. She wanted to put it in her mouth and taste it. She wanted to lick clean those horns that

poked out of her hair.

"Master, you're drooling."

"Whoops, pardon me." Frederica took the handkerchief decorated with the two-hundred-and-fifty-sixth-note pattern Tot Pop handed her and wiped the corner of her mouth. Archfiend Pam's incredible power was overwhelmingly attractive to her.

Pukin had already drawn her sword, while Sonia stood before her, on guard. This was the first time since their escape from prison that Frederica had seen Pukin look serious. She wasn't smirking, scoffing, or narrowing her eyes in displeasure. She examined Archfiend Pam with a cautious gaze.

Archfiend Pam's expression was practically a mirror image of Pukin's. They were evaluating each other, drawing conclusions about their opponent. They both recognized each other as powerful foes.

Without a sound, Archfiend Pam slowly alighted on the ground, her four wings guarding her body. In a low voice, Frederica prompted caution. She could sense that even though she spoke quietly, Pam could hear her, but she still couldn't bring herself to be loud. "That's Archfiend Pam. She's with the Department of Diplomacy and is widely known as the most powerful magical girl."

"Oh-ho. The most powerful, eh? Aside from ourselves."

"She's the most powerful magical girl of the present day—not of all time."

Archfiend Pam was looking at them as if she could see straight through them. Frederica couldn't believe she was imagining that. It felt like the temperature here had dropped by two or three degrees. Tot Pop shivered.

Archfiend Pam's gaze shifted over to Hana, who lay at Sonia's feet. She eyed her for a few seconds before quickly looking away again.

"Who are you?" Pam spoke in English. She'd heard them talking, after all. She spoke with impeccable pronunciation, and most of all, her voice carried well. Mysteriously, she reminded Frederica of Cranberry, though she was not at all similar in tone or expression. Maybe Frederica just wanted to think that.

Not at all overawed by Archfiend Pam, Pukin retorted boldly, "Is it not proper manners to introduce oneself before asking another's name?"

"My name is Archfiend Pam. Are you the assassins?"

“Our name is Pukin. *Assassin!* How rude.”

The air between them was grating.

Tot Pop grabbed the end of the rope that bound Hana, attempting to drag her away toward the Fury’s wreckage and hide in the shadow of the car.

But the rope was cut, and Hana’s body rose in the air. Stuck holding the end of the rope, Tot Pop’s expression stiffened in shock as she looked up at Hana. One of the square wings had transformed into a human shape to scoop up the limp Hana, and it was now floating in the air. Pam had not only been fast—her trick of turning their attention to herself as she used her magic elsewhere was also magnificent.

“You don’t need a hostage.”

Pukin was not at all bothered by what Archfiend Pam had done…or, at the very least, not from what Frederica could see. The corners of Pukin’s lips twisted in disdain for her enemy as she brandished her sword at Pam. “How insolent, to steal our prisoner without paying ransom.”

“I don’t want to hear that from the sort of insolent character who would torture a prisoner.”

Pukin made to advance, but Sonia held her back, taking one step forward. With her right hand, Sonia pinched the fingertips of her left glove, sliding it off her hand to toss it at Archfiend Pam. Blown in the wind, the white glove flew toward Pam and landed softly at her feet.

Putting her hands to her waist in a bold pose, Sonia yelled, “Duel me proper, fair and square!”

They were in the numerically superior position with four people on their side. Frederica couldn’t understand why Sonia would abandon that advantage and deliberately propose a one-on-one duel. Baffled by the purpose of this sudden declaration, Frederica looked over at Pukin.

Pukin retreated half a step and whispered quietly, “When Sonia fights in earnest, she sees no friend or foe. She’s saying she means to duel this girl, so if you value your safety, then stand back. Sonia! We entrust this to you!”

It would be foolish to be caught in the cross fire of such a fight. So Frederica followed Pukin and backed away.

“It’s truly, *truly* been such a long time since a magical girl has challenged me to a one-on-one duel!” Archfiend Pam shouted back.

Her expression was no longer calm as it had been. Her whole face, from the tip of her chin to her hairline, was twisted in joy, her expression one of elation. “Your name?”

“…Sonia Bean.”

The black human shape that held Hana grew great wings that beat in the air, flying away. Archfiend Pam looked down on Sonia, who was crouched in a low fighting stance. *How can the act of looking down on someone be so picturesque?* Frederica wondered privately, basking in delight.

“I accept, Sonia Bean! Have at me!”

Sonia raced toward her, and Archfiend Pam’s wings sliced through the air.

☆ **Archfiend Pam (Time remaining: ten hours, fifty-three minutes)**

She didn’t feel she could hold back. Her mission wasn’t to kill the assassin, and she was supposed to prevent others from killing her, too, so it was really not a good thing to have an opponent she couldn’t hold back with. But exhilaration was rising within her. She had to fight with the intent to kill, lest she be killed herself. Her opponent was just that strong.

Pam had all four of her wings in tow when she arrived on the scene, and there she had confirmed it was no car accident at all. The fencer and patches were stronger opponents than she’d ever encountered in her life. The one-on-one fight, the introduction, the fencer saying patches couldn’t distinguish enemy or ally, so it was best for her to fight alone—all of this excited Archfiend Pam.

Her professionalism had long since come undone. She’d saved Hana first not out of a desire to save an ally, but based on the calculation that it would be disadvantageous for her to be a hostage. Her brain was overwhelmed with the selfish desire to enjoy this battle.

Sonia scraped at the road with her toe, like a fighting bull, and Pam could sense in it her roiling urge to fight. The other three quickly took shelter. They hadn’t fled—they were watching from somewhere. Pam had to keep an eye on them, too, or she would be in danger.

As Sonia Bean raced toward her, Archfiend Pam muttered,

"*Hadraniel.*" Using one of her wings as an enveloping wall, Pam unfurled it between herself and the enemy, while simultaneously —"*Longinus.*" She transformed her other two wings into spears to attack Sonia from either side.

In battles between magical girls, much depended on compatibility. It was always best to choose a strategy that sought to prevent the outcome from depending on compatibility. You read your enemy's attacks. If you could react instantly to your opponent's intent to strike, they would never be able to strike first and leave you in an awkward position. Archfiend Pam used the wall to block Sonia's vision, and with that as her defense, she deployed two spears in her blind spots to skewer her.

Pam gave both the walls and the spears the power of sight. The advantage of being able to see her opponent while the enemy's line of fire was obstructed was always useful. Right now, it was important to read the enemy's intentions based on her eye movements and her slightest gestures. At this point in a fight, she would start getting a feeling when magical girls with a counter-style magic were planning something. In this case, it was best to see how things went, first, and not just directly stab her with the spears.

Sonia just kept running, running forward. She didn't try to avoid the spears. It wasn't that she couldn't avoid them, but rather, it seemed she simply had no intention of doing so. Observing this, Pam figured she must have some kind of defensive magic. Either she would repel the spears, or it didn't matter if she was stabbed. Her response was very similar to that of the Arabian dancing girl Pam had fought in the sky.

The aim of the two Longinus was true, striking Sonia's body from either side, but their tips were erased as if they were as fragile as charcoal. Hadraniel, too, which was specialized for defense, was no hindrance to her, and Sonia simply tore a human-shaped hole in it. Sonia was energetically running for Archfiend Pam.

It seemed Sonia's magic could scatter away whatever she touched. Pam's prediction that hers was a defensive magic had only been half-correct—it was *both* offensive and defensive. Longinus was sharp enough to easily pierce through several layers of bedrock, and Hadraniel could resist a nuclear attack at close range. The moment Sonia had touched them, they had disappeared with no resistance at all. Her touch had ignored all their powers of attack and durability, scattering them like dregs, and that was it.

Sonia had broken through the three wings Pam had used, expending them. Her remaining wing was busy saving Hana. There was nothing to come between Sonia and Pam. Sonia's movements were easily readable. She wasn't just running toward Pam, trying to get close to her. She meant to slam right into her and tackle her. Pam could tell from the way her muscles moved.

Could Pam stop her? Even if she wanted to, she couldn't bear down on Sonia from above, couldn't counter in some way, like with a knee to the face. Archfiend Pam's body was surely no exception to Sonia's magic. The moment Sonia touched her, Pam would turn to dust and disappear.

So she just had to crush her before Sonia even made contact.

Archfiend Pam raised her right foot four inches and wound up to stomp down. The asphalt cracked out from the center point where Pam's foot came down, shattering, caving in, and sharpening into a fine split. The sudden cave-in of the path before Sonia made her stumble, and her stance fell apart.

Archfiend Pam's greatest strength in battle was using her transforming wings, but that didn't mean the body those wings protected was fragile. Pam firmly believed that if pride in the power of her magic were to ever cause her to avoid direct hand-to-hand combat, then she would be over as a magical girl.

Archfiend Pam took a step back to gain some distance, then commanded her spears and wall to regenerate. It would be about five seconds until they reappeared. She would endure until then.

Sonia dashed right, then left, then barreled toward Pam. She wasn't just charging straight at her—she weaved feints and steps into her movements. At ground level, Pam flew like an acrobat, jumping, leaping, and spinning to evade Sonia's fingertips. The few strands of hair that her touch did catch turned black and crumbled away. Pam's evasions still weren't tight enough, so she kicked it up a notch.

In general, opponents whose magic required physical contact in order to work were comparatively easy to fight. If they didn't have the ability to fly, then Archfiend Pam just had to get up in the air and fire shots at them endlessly. But they were in a bad location. Pam put some distance between herself and Sonia as she scanned the area. At a glance, the four-lane highway was wide, but it was too narrow for Pam to unleash her full power. With terrain like this, if Pam were to escape to the skies where the enemy couldn't touch

her, then they'd probably escape to the nearby city. And if that happened, giving chase would be difficult.

If Sonia were to rampage through the city, that would amplify the amount of needless damage. Archfiend Pam had not been sent here to get innocent civilians slaughtered.

Fortunately, they were on the city's outskirts. Only street signs, vending machines, grasslands, farmland, and guardrails filled this area. The only place where it seemed there might be people was a building that looked like some kind of museum or record office, which must have been empty since no one had shown up even after a car had crashed into one of its gateposts. Therefore, if she finished this battle before any ambulances and police cars came, she could avoid causing needless casualties.

Sonia was the only one in her view. From where were the other three watching their fight? Her wings finished regenerating, and she immediately directed them to attack. With this opponent, there was no point in defense.

"Gehenna." Pam turned one wing to flame to engulf Sonia whole, and it scattered to pieces, starting with the corner that touched her. It didn't leave a single burn on Sonia's body.

"Logos." She turned another wing into destructive sound waves vectored toward Sonia, but they, too, vanished, completely ineffective.

"Lucifer." She focused light to try attacking with high temperature. But the formation of rays rotted soot-black in the places Sonia touched them. Even to Pam, who called herself Archfiend, the spectacle was hellish. Sonia ran around with energy, seemingly not even slightly blinded by the light.

"Minos." Pam couldn't blow her away with wind, either. Sonia's spread hand shielded her from the blast, and the air turned into black dregs that scattered behind her.

"Echidna." She didn't even think this would work, but she created poisonous air anyway, and it had no effect, as expected.

"Cocytus." If adding energy was pointless, then what about removing energy? Pam wondered. She attempted to freeze Sonia by lowering the air temperature, but this didn't work at all, and when Sonia touched the air, it scattered.

And even as Pam tried one attack after another, Sonia's assault never let up, so Pam was forced to keep dodging her—though it was less dodging and more fleeing. In this game of tag, Sonia was "it."

Pam would die if Sonia touched her.

With a limited arena for their fight, Archfiend Pam couldn't run wherever she pleased. Fleeing somewhere unwise would only bring further damage. This four-lane highway was the only place she could move around in.

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: ten hours, forty-eight minutes)

Hana was flying through the air.

Mana pointed and cried out, and Ripple ran after her, giving chase. Nothing but incomprehensible things had been happening, one after another. 7753 was constantly at the mercy of passing events, and it was the most she could do to keep up.

Before long, Ripple returned with Hana in her arms. Hana had been beaten all over, and half her ear had been cut off, too. She had undergone horrible torment. Mana wailed again.

Hana opened her eyes a crack, and her lips moved slightly. She was smiling. "I didn't imagine…I'd live to see you again."

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard, Hana."

"That wasn't my intention… Oh, I really can't believe I managed to get out of that alive."

With her eyes and ears covered, Hana would have had no way of knowing who had saved her, but by process of elimination, she was able to narrow it down to one. "You're all here… So that means… Um… Did Archfiend Pam save me?"

"A black sphere brought you back here… Then it turned into a square wing and went back. If my eyes weren't mistaken, that was Archfiend Pam's wing… I think."

"Oh, then it was her, after all. She really did…save me."

"Who did this to you? Was it Frederica's crew?"

Ripple raced out in the direction Hana had flown in from. If her information was correct, there were multiple enemies. Ripple had to be going out to support Archfiend Pam. 7753 hesitated, wondering if she should follow. However, she figured she wouldn't be of any use even if she were to accompany Ripple, so she stayed with Hana.

Instructions from her boss came in her goggles. Hana was incredibly battered. 7753's boss said to choose a place out of sight where they could settle down, go there, and have Mana heal Hana.

This was a reasonable order. Hana was weakened. She needed

to be healed someplace where they wouldn't gather attention. So 7753 told Mana this and carried Hana through three alleyways into the shadow of a vending machine.

Her boss would have a map of the town. Her specific choice of going through three alleyways to hide in the shadow of a vending machine to rest was precise. 7753 was grateful for her specific direction.

Referencing a memo in one hand, Mana drew out a magic sigil, laid Hana down in its center, took up her staff, and began reciting the spell. She probably meant to use healing magic. Whether Hana was aware of this or not, she smiled faintly as she lay there. 7753 squeezed her hand.

☆ Archfiend Pam (Time remaining: ten hours, thirty-nine minutes)

Pam tried slicing her with blades, igniting gunpowder to make her explode, burying her in piles of sediment, and crushing her under a giant press, but nothing worked. Sonia's eyes sparkled like those of a child with a new toy as she pressed closer to Archfiend Pam.

Ha-ha. So I'm the toy, huh?

This is a bit too bloody to be made into magical-girl merchandise. She laughed at herself, well aware that she, too, was like a child with a new toy.

Archfiend Pam continued to observe Sonia Bean as she ran from her. Everything that touched Sonia turned to black dregs and scattered away. Pam could continue for a hundred years, but normal attacks wouldn't win this. She had to change the way she was thinking about this.

"Mastema." She arranged three of her wings in a drill shape and propelled them over the road. She wasn't aiming for Sonia but rather the road at Sonia's feet. Rotating rapidly, the drill carved into the road, blowing up dust.

Pam wasn't just trying to destroy the asphalt. She tore up the earth underneath the pavement, too, not only ripping it apart but shoveling down. Dust and concrete pieces billowed up. Sonia seemed confused by how the wings weren't attacking her and came for Pam. *Not yet.* Pam kept digging.

Focusing only on carving away at the ground, Pam dug a hole.

The ground under Sonia's feet crumbled, and she tumbled down. Pam made the hole deep—very deep. If you were to look down on it from the sky, it would look like a circle gouged out of the earth. Pam transformed one black wing into the shape of a suit to cover her whole body, leaving nothing exposed. The dust here was thick, so she couldn't go in without the suit.

Archfiend Pam went to stand at the bottom of the hole, and beyond the clouds of dust, she saw a form moving.

Sonia ran. This space was limited, just a little over a hundred feet wide, so there wasn't anywhere to escape. In this battlefield, the attacker would be at an advantage.

Archfiend Pam raised black films between herself and Sonia. These films, which could be described as gently moving, thin walls, stood as obstructions all over the hole. They weren't there to prevent Sonia from getting around. No matter in existence could stop Sonia from going where she wanted to. These were for obstructing her vision.

Pam gave these membranes the ability to be her eyes, then circled back around the films and away from Sonia. At that exact moment, her fourth wing returned. It was the wing she'd used to send Hana to safety and free her from her restraints. Pam placed it over the hole, transformed it into a sticky, flammable liquid, and then scattered it inside.

"Gehenna." She ignited the wing, making the entire hole go up in flames. Unlike her earlier Gehenna, the goal here was not to burn Sonia directly. Heat didn't work on this enemy. Archfiend Pam set the wing alight as she continued to produce flammable liquid to keep the fire going, taking special care not to touch Sonia. And no matter how many of the films Sonia erased, Pam produced more, confusing Sonia with their maze.

Gradually, Sonia slowed down, and Pam along with her. She never let Sonia give up. She always made Sonia feel that she was there, maintaining a close enough distance to make Sonia feel she had almost reached her. As she made the flames blaze higher and higher, she also took care in where she placed them, making sure they would never come in direct contact with Sonia.

Sonia staggered, her steps unsteady, and she looked ready to fall at any moment. But she still never lost the hope, the sense that she could almost reach Archfiend Pam, coming for her. Sonia thrust through a film, tongue hanging from her mouth as she gasped in

pain. Illuminated by the blazing flames, her face shone red.

Good.

It was working.

Sonia Bean possessed a power that would protect her from and allow her to attack external threats. No matter how Archfiend Pam attacked her from the outside, she would never be able to break through Sonia Bean's magic. So then, she thought, what if, rather than attacking Sonia Bean herself, she were to steal an ally from her?

All magical girls breathed, unless they had some particular equipment or magic. Without oxygen, no matter how sturdy a magical girl was, she couldn't do anything. Archfiend Pam had been continuously burning up the oxygen within the restricted space of this hole to hinder Sonia's breathing. Even a magical girl's superior lungs could not guarantee infinite activity. Of course, in anticipation of this, Pam had stored some air for herself inside her suit.

By the time Sonia realized she couldn't breathe, it was already too late. She was too absorbed in the fight.

Sonia tried to yell something, but her voice wouldn't come out.

She could use her magic to dig at the walls and ground to expand the hole. But Archfiend Pam would still continue to surround her with fire, sending it after her without ever letting it touch her.

Sonia was out of options. She tried to climb up the irregular spots in the wall in order to escape the hole, but Pam instantly erased all protrusions. A tentacle extended from one of her wings to destroy Sonia's footholds, and Sonia pitched forward, tottering.

Archfiend Pam cleared away her films. Once Pam had revealed herself, Sonia spun around to glare at her. Sonia Bean, who had fought with such excitement and glee, was now pared down to only hatred.

Sonia fell to her knees, both hands hitting the ground, her rear rising in the air. She was not collapsing, however. By the time Pam realized that she was crouching to sprint, Sonia was already charging for her.

A magical girl's fluctuations in emotion affected her strength. Sonia Bean was near her end, and this mad dash probably took everything she had left. Just as a candle blazed strongest right before it flickered out, a magical girl displayed her hidden strength

when she was cornered.

Bursting through the flames, Sonia was instantly there, embracing Pam—having failed to notice what she held was a dummy. She pitched forward.

Archfiend Pam never let her guard down, even before an opponent on the brink of death. The wing that she'd been using as the films, she had transformed into a statue that resembled herself, placing it in front of Sonia for her to snap at with her dying gasp. Sonia, her consciousness dimming from lack of oxygen, had completely fallen for it. The wing statue of Pam destroyed, Sonia collapsed and fell still.

Pam pulled away from the wall and undid her suit. She now focused the flammable fluid and the flames with which she'd filled the hole around Sonia to finish her off completely as she transformed the suit to a shield at her arm to block the torrent of music notes firing at her from outside the hole.

Despite how this crew had placed specific emphasis on challenging her to a one-on-one duel, she had known they would interfere at some point. She wouldn't curse them as cowardly or rude. This was simply what battle was.

Her suit had been protecting her from the heat, and undoing it meant she was immediately scorched all over. A magical girl could withstand it, but she didn't want to stay here long.

Each and every one of the music notes hit hard enough to beat flesh and break bone. *I can't let them hit me*, she thought, and that was when she sensed a menace behind her: the fencer and the fortune-teller.

She'd turned one of her wings into flammable liquid. One more was the flame. Sonia had destroyed the one she'd made to look like herself, and she wasn't yet able to regenerate it. Her remaining wing had been her suit, and now it acted as a shield against the music notes. The enemy must have been calculating that Pam would have to rely on only her physical strength to deal with any further attacks, so two-on-one, they had to be able to kill her.

Of course, Archfiend Pam had taken all of this into consideration.

At most, Pam could control four wings with her magic—but she also had another two. They were her original two wings, essentially an extension of her costume and body, and she could neither separate them from herself nor turn them into something else.

Normally, they were small, and she hid them from view. She only restored them when she truly needed them.

And now was one of those times.

Archfiend Pam spread the wings on her back wide, turning aside the sword thrusting toward her with one as she blocked the fortune-teller's kick with the other. Surprised, her opponents were slow to react. The fortune-teller hesitated, but not the fencer. So then the fencer was the one to prioritize.

With a flap of her wings, Pam slammed the fortune-teller in the side. The fortune-teller guarded properly but couldn't absorb the force of it entirely, and she was blown sideways about thirty feet to hit the wall of the hole.

Pam put some distance between herself and the fortune-teller to face her one-on-one. She wouldn't let her opponents flee. She'd end this contest here. The wing she'd turned into flammable liquid, she now transformed into a humanoid shape and sent it toward the fortune-teller in order to buy some time. It could be on automatic control. The wing she'd turned to flame, she couldn't yet undo. She would leave it as is until Sonia was completely dead.

Pam focused everything else on the fencer, sending two of her wings to strike from either side in an embracing attack. The fencer magnificently sidestepped the strike from the right and made to parry the left wing with her rapier. Archfiend Pam canceled the attack by shrinking the wing a bit, refusing to let the rapier touch it. The enemy seemed to be deliberately choosing to use a very thin rapier to block Pam's strikes.

The fencer's aim was strange. She moved as if all she needed to do was touch Pam. There was a good chance that rapier was a magic weapon, so Pam needed to avoid touching it carelessly.

The fencer thrust her rapier out. Pam leaped back from the first attack, and the second, a further stab, she twisted to avoid, while the third, she ducked under. Meanwhile, Archfiend Pam sent two of her wings crawling along the ground, using them to leap into the air and unleash a diversionary kick. She pulled back her leg before the fourth stab could touch her shin, and next, she swung out with her pivot leg, aiming to kick the fencer's right arm, but was intercepted by an elbow that sent numbness running along the top of her foot.

Then the fifth attack. Archfiend Pam was in an awkward stance, making it difficult for her to evade—or so she made it seem. Using

the two wings crawling along the ground, she lifted a giant slab of concrete at their feet and pushed it up the moment of the enemy's attack. The rapier stuck into the concrete slab, and Archfiend Pam dashed around behind it.

Circling clockwise, she attacked the enemy from behind the concrete slab. The fencer abandoned her stuck rapier, swinging for Pam's face with her fist, but Pam caught the punch in her left palm, stopping it. She squeezed, meaning to crush it, but the fencer's fist was hard.

The fencer stomped on one of the wings Pam had used on the concrete slab, while Pam grabbed her wrist to stop her from attacking with her dagger. She tried to attack with her second wing, but the fencer had it pressed under the concrete slab with her foot.

The fencer's feet held her wings in check. Their hands were locked in a grapple. *Another foot, then*, thought Pam, but right before she could release a kick, the fencer forced her back. The fencer's left hand, holding the dagger, and her right fist both increased pressure, pushing toward her.

Gradually, Archfiend Pam was being pushed back. If she were to kick, she'd be bowled over. The fencer was stronger. Pam had assumed a rapier user would focus on technique and speed, but this one was also exceptionally strong.

Interesting!

The fencer pushed even harder, and right as she did, Pam swung her head down, smashing the fencer's nose with her forehead, but even then, the fencer's pushing didn't let up. Instead, she smashed Pam's chin with her forehead. Without even flinching, Pam head-butted her, crushing the fencer's nose with the crown of her head. Blood spurted from the fencer's nose, skin ripping, and that blood mixed with the blood from her nose as Pam head-butted her one more time, but the enemy intercepted the strike with her own forehead, and both their heads were flung away from each other.

The enemy would still not let up in her pushing. Pam could only inch her wings out, and the enemy's hands were gradually nearing her. Head-butting wouldn't get her anywhere. *Should I bite at her neck?* Pam thought and looked at the fencer—and noticed her expression. Her forehead was cut up and her nose was crushed, but that wasn't the issue. It was the look on her face. She had a strange expression on her face, as if she were looking upon something

incomprehensible—her gaze wasn't on Archfiend Pam. She was looking past Pam's face, at something behind her.

What's she looking at?

The instant after the thought popped into Pam's mind, something stabbed her from behind, straight through her abdomen, and she coughed up blood. Something sparkled under the shining red flames, splattered crimson with Archfiend Pam's own blood. It was more distinct right here than it ever was in the sky after the rain: a multicolored rainbow. Pam hadn't felt it coming. She'd felt no heat, no sound.

A rainbow? Why?

The rainbow that pierced Pam's body pushed on through her to rip open the fencer's stomach, too. The fencer lost her balance and pitched forward, diagonally, jerking out to grab her rapier, which was stuck in the concrete slab. But the sword couldn't support her body weight, and the rapier ripped out of the slab. The fencer let go of Pam's hands and rolled along the ground.

Archfiend Pam tried to pull herself off the rainbow, somehow, but her arms were too weak. She couldn't give chase or turn around. The rainbow was supporting her body.

A second and third rainbow struck. She couldn't evade them.

Sliced to shreds by the Technicolor rainbows, Archfiend Pam breathed her last.

☆ Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: ten hours, twenty minutes)

When Pukin had insisted they go save Sonia, Frederica had agreed —in form. She had no sincere desire to save Sonia. What she wanted to do was defeat Archfiend Pam. Frederica judged that in order to eliminate Archfiend Pam, the most powerful magical girl within the barrier and also the greatest obstacle in their current situation, it was best Sonia be their noble sacrifice. So Frederica should not butt in to save Sonia but rather aim for the moment when Pam was finishing Sonia off, when Pam's attention would be most focused, to catch the Archfiend by surprise. If the three of them were to attack all at once, they'd have a chance at winning.

Leave the timing to me, Frederica had assured Pukin, and she'd deliberately held off the attack. Then, under the pretext of saving Sonia, she'd rushed in, knowing it was too late.

It had all worked out perfectly—or it should have. With perfect timing, they had caught their opponent unawares and prevented Archfiend Pam from using all four wings to the fullest, so that even if she blocked the first attack, she would be short two wings—or in other words, she would have to physically evade their two attacks and succeed at it both times. All Frederica had to do was attack as a diversion, while Pukin's strike only had to skim her to be fatal.

But Pam had been ahead of Frederica. Even with all Frederica's vast knowledge, she had been unaware of Pam's fifth and sixth wings. An ace in the hole for when the need arose, Frederica supposed.

Pam avoided Frederica's and Pukin's attacks with her hidden wings, then set the black humanoid on Frederica, which prevented her from helping Pukin. But even as the situation deteriorated into further desperation, Frederica was rapturous. This plan, conceived by a dirty magical girl like Frederica, which involved sacrificing an ally in order to take down an opponent, had been demolished. This was exactly what made Pam the Archfiend.

Even as she was thrown back by Pam's wing and slammed into the wall of the hole, Frederica was intoxicated—and then she saw it: that suddenly appearing rainbow. For some reason, sharp, material rainbows were stabbing through Archfiend Pam.

Her intoxication evaporated, and she was yanked back to reality. Archfiend Pam's body, arms, legs, head, and hair! All of them scattered with a massive gush of blood. The flames vanished, and Sonia was already less than ash. Pukin was gone, leaving traces of her blood behind. Frederica blinked. She had no time to be dazed.

Rushing up out of the hole, she emerged to find three girls there.

One was dressed in a manner reminiscent of a postal delivery girl and was holding her knees, trembling.

One, who carried a rainbow on her back, wore a smirk on her face.

The last one…was lying in a puddle of blood. Her transformation was undone, and her trademark brutish guitar was also gone.

Frederica figured out what had just happened. Her party had been clams. While all of them had been scrabbling around in the mud in the sandpiper's bill, the fisherman had come. While the clams and the sandpiper were locked in struggle, the fisherman harvested all of them.

A tiny fairy flew out from the rainbow girl's clothing. What should have been such a cute face was instead twisted into an ugly smirk, surprisingly similar to the one on the rainbow girl's face.

"We did iiit! Archfiend Pam and some other girl are dead! I dunno who she was, but she must've been strong if she was fighting Archfiend Pam. That means we got rid of two strong girls! All right!"

"I'm not sure she's actually dead. But at least I took out Archfiend Pam."

"Yeah, yeah, you sure did! That was a super underdog victory. Now you're number one in my mental ranking of magical girls I want to get hugs from, Rain Pow!"

"I'd rather not hug you, Toko."

The two of them held their stomachs and cackled.

"Now there's just that one who ran off. And one of Cranberry's children was there, right?"

“Oh, I don’t think she’ll be much of a problem. I fought her a bit, and she wasn’t that strong.” The rainbow girl gave the postal delivery girl a rough shove with her foot. The postal girl fell over, looking up with frightened eyes. “I even managed to beat this dead weight all on my own.”

“I’d expect nothing less of you, Rain Pow! So there’s no problems, eh?”

“If anything’s a problem, I guess it’d be the one who ran away and this other one.”

The two of them looked over at Frederica, who was now out of allies. She had no crystal ball with which to use her magic, so she’d have to do things using her words. She had to escape this pinch, be it through negotiation or wheedling. “I have a suggestion.”

“And I won’t hear it.” The moment Frederica opened her mouth, she was shot down. “I’ll kill you. That’s all. I’ll get it done quick, then kill the one who ran, too.”

This was not someone who could be convinced. And judging by the situation, it seemed fleeing would be difficult, too. Without her crystal ball, the rainbow girl was too much for Frederica to handle. She was too spent to turn around and continuously avoid rainbows as she ran, and besides, she was fairly wounded.

Frederica looked at the girl who was collapsed in a puddle of blood. It was her student. She’d been Pythie Frederica’s number one student, someone who could make friends with anyone.

Realizing that Frederica was looking at the body, the rainbow girl’s smile got bigger. “It would’ve saved me some time if you’d been the one outside the hole. That was my bad.”

The fairy smiled in tandem. “I never would’ve thought I’d end up killing Pythie Frederica. Why’re you here? Weren’t you arrested? Hey, Rain Pow, this one’s pretty famous.”

Frederica observed herself objectively and was surprised. She was angry Tot Pop had been killed. Pythie Frederica would use anyone for the sake of her goals and her pleasure; ethics and compassion were less than trash to her, and at the end of it all, she’d been imprisoned for this but had still never changed her ways. She had freed two monsters, Pukin and Sonia, and basked in self-satisfaction over it, too.

Another, calmer part of her was watching her own anger and hatred from a distance. *How surprising that even someone like me can feel anger*, she coolly observed as she edged forward, her feet never

leaving the ground.

The two opponents' smiles vanished, and rainbows of various sizes, lots of them, floated all around the magical girl. They seemed to fill every space. Frederica already knew just how sharp they were.

The rainbow girl whistled. "Look, Toko. She's gonna fight for serious."

"That's disappointing. I was looking forward to seeing how that escaped convict would beg for her life."

"You'd think someone with a name like *Pythie* would be more *pitiful*, huh? She doesn't seem to get the picture, does she?"

Frederica moved forward, having resigned herself to the fact that she couldn't win this without her crystal ball.

The rainbow girl grabbed the postal girl by the collar and whispered in her ear, "Hey, Tsuko, you're gonna be my hostage later. So I won't kill you, for now. But if you try to run, I'll kill you first thing—before I even take care of that old hag over there. You got that?" She wasn't really trying to keep her voice down. She probably just wanted to threaten the girl. That even Frederica could hear her proved as much.

Face pale, the postal girl jerked her head up and down a few times. The rainbow girl smirked and tossed the postal girl back.

☆ Hana Gekokujou (Time remaining: ten hours, fifteen minutes)

The pain in her body was easing up, albeit slowly. She understood that her wounds were healing faster than her natural recovery capabilities would have. She was gradually gaining more energy, too. Hana pushed herself into a sitting position and brought her hand up to her right bunny ear. It was quite splendidly cut in half.

"You should stay down."

"No, I'm okay. And more to the point, lying down on concrete at this time of year is freezing cold. That's enough to suck my energy all on its own." She laughed a "ha-ha." It felt like it had been a really long time since she'd last laughed out loud. She had been quite sincerely ready for death, privately thinking heroically grim thoughts of either dying in a way that wouldn't cause problems or ending it herself if she was captured. If rescue from

that situation was possible, then anything was.

Hana touched her right bunny ear again. It really was severed after all.

Will this grow back?

If it wasn't coming back, that might make things a little difficult. A half cut-off ear had way too much punch. Making people wary of her on first meeting would limit her work, like it did with Ripple. Hana was sure Ripple was a pretty good person, but she looked intimidating, and it made for a pretty extreme impression. Well, pushing the contrast between her appearance and personality to the foreground could be an option. She'd have kind of liked to ask Ripple about that.

As Hana wondered what had happened with Ripple, she glanced in the direction she'd run off. The alley emerged into a big road, coming to a dead end at a clock shop with its shutters down. Hana couldn't see anything beyond that. She still believed Archfiend Pam would resolve things by herself. She felt an absolute sense of security on that point, such as a fetus feels toward its mother. But what about Ripple? She hadn't gotten involved in that attack, had she?

With her wounds healing, Hana was starting to feel good enough that she could worry about others. She sharpened her hearing, focused her attention on the direction Ripple had headed, and picked up on footsteps racing fast toward them. It wasn't Ripple —her single-toothed geta made her footsteps sound unique.

By the time the thought hit her, she could already see the enemy. It was the fencer magical girl who had been with Frederica, the one she'd called "Your Excellency." In her right hand, she held a naked rapier, and in her left, she held her stomach. She was bleeding horribly from the face, and her orange hair was dyed red. Her nose was crushed into ugliness, and her expression was that of a demon, her clenched teeth bared.

Hana stood and shoved Mana and 7753 to the ground.

Pukin looked surprised. It seemed she hadn't expected to meet them here. From her expression and her wounds, Hana could tell she was fleeing something. Archfiend Pam? Or Ripple? In which case, they could corner her. Pukin was desperate. She didn't have the spare energy to kill them, and running would be her number one priority. But if Hana were to just stand in front of her, she would be struck aside. Hana wasn't fully prepared, either.

She thought about what she should do. A crisis lay before her. Could she make herself move? Though her wounds had healed a bit, she was still far from fully recovered. She still couldn't put up a decent fight. So once Pukin entered her range, Hana would crank up her senses. With those wounds, if Hana were to sharpen Pukin's sense of pain, she would collapse, incapacitated by the agony. Then Hana could let Archfiend Pam or Ripple finish her off.

Hana watched Pukin close in with a single motion. She shattered the concrete, leaving a clean footprint in her wake. Both her stab and her step were frighteningly fast. But if this was a contest of speed, then Hana was no lesser.

The very moment the enemy stepped into her area of effect, Hana activated her magic. One-on-one and against Pukin, there was no need or reason for her to hold back. She sharpened Pukin's sense of pain to the limit—but Pukin's thrust didn't stop. Hana slipped under Pukin's sword, taking a shallow slice to her rabbit ear, but somehow managed to avoid a direct hit.

She knew she'd activated her magic. But Pukin hadn't reacted, just stabbing straight forward with her sword. Next, Pukin spun around with another thrust, and the unexpected attack sliced open Hana's right shoulder, and she fell to her knees.

Pukin's left hand reached out to her dagger in its sheath. When it was halfway drawn, Hana rose one step faster, smacking her enemy in the jaw with the heel of her palm. Pukin fought it, but Hana put her whole body's weight behind it to slam the back of Pukin's head into the wall.

Pukin gave a soft moan as she slid down the wall. Hana pressed the center of her own chest with a hand and warm blood gushed through her fingers. Pukin's dagger was thrust hilt-deep into her.

Hana dropped her hand from her chest, and the blood poured out even more dramatically, dyeing her kimono red, dripping down inside her clothes all the way to her thighs. Tightening her fist, she brought it in front of her face. She glared at Pukin as if to say, *"Now, it's serious."* She couldn't fall yet. Archfiend Pam or Ripple would come soon. She had to hold on somehow, until then.

Looking at Pukin's face, she noticed the faint cut running across her cheek. Hana was fairly certain that a cut from Pukin's sword would cause her magic to do something to that person. Considering how the wedding dress girl had been acting, it was probably brainwashing or subordination. Pukin had known what Hana's

magic was and so had cut herself with her own sword before charging in to give herself something that would resist it. She'd forced herself to believe the pain was something else. It had to be something like that.

Hana was beyond using her magic now, but she didn't let it show on her face. With a composed expression that said, *"This blood is nothing,"* she took a step forward.

Pukin pointed her sword at Hana, but when she heard a sound like a crashing car coming from the direction she'd run, she grimaced. With a click of her tongue, Pukin left, cape fluttering behind her as she ran off. The entire event passed in only a few seconds of time.

Hana leaned back against the wall of the building in the alley. 7753 and Mana got up and clung to her, the two of them crying. The heat burning in her chest gradually faded. Cold spread through her whole body, infecting her thoughts, and her mind went hazy, too.

They had failed to corner Pukin. But if Mana and 7753 were safe, then she'd managed to fulfill her role as their guard, at least, and with this she was mildly satisfied as her consciousness faded.

CHAPTER 10
WALKING ON A RAINBOW

☆ **Toko (Time remaining: ten hours, thirteen minutes)**

If Archfiend Pam would just die, there would no longer be any magical girls here capable of beating Rain Pow. Even if the middle school group were to all get together, Rain Pow would still be able to defeat them easily—and none of the others would get together in the first place.

After coming to this conclusion, Toko corrected herself. That wasn't quite true.

Archfiend Pam had not been beyond Rain Pow's ability to deal with. Rain Pow had managed her by cutting into the battle between Pam and the unknown magical girls, and as a result, Rain Pow had killed Archfiend Pam. She'd totally gotten back at her for all those slaps.

"Dealing with" someone didn't always mean doing it through direct force. Rain Pow had tricked Pam by making her think she was just a harmless middle school kid, purely a victim, an innocent new magical girl. Even Archfiend Pam, with her long career, immense combat experience, and wealth of magical-girl knowledge, could be deceived. That was the magical girl Toko had raised: She would betray and deceive, and she would trust nobody. Toko trusted Rain Pow, but even she didn't know if Rain Pow trusted her.

The magical girl before them…was Pythie Frederica. Why was this scoundrel who was supposed to have been in jail right here? Rain Pow would get her.

"Now finish her, Rain Pow!"

"Got it."

Toko dived into Rain Pow's shirt. It was warm here and the

easiest place to be. Rain Pow extended her rainbows toward Frederica, all of which were equally sturdy, regardless of size. They were hard enough for magical girls to run on and sharp as razors—and Rain Pow was capable of deploying far more than just one or two at a time.

Frederica slipped under the first rainbow and sidestepped the second. She charged forward, empty-handed.

Frederica dodged rainbow after rainbow. The third rainbow, she mounted and leaped off, and the fourth, she repelled with her right hand without noticing it was a feint. The fifth rainbow appeared in the shadow of the fourth, aiming right between her eyes. But the moment before it could connect, a shuriken came flying, repelling it. The rainbow's trajectory changed, instead just skimming Frederica's forehead.

"Hmm?"

A shuriken? Whose? It hadn't been Frederica's.

There was a ninja—a ninja whose left eye was crushed, her left arm missing—standing atop the guardrail, red scarf fluttering.

You've gotta be kidding me, thought Toko.

☆ Ripple (Time remaining: ten hours, twelve minutes)

Ripple immediately regretted throwing that shuriken. She'd ended up saving someone whom she'd rather see dead. Ripple believed there were some people the world would be better off without. Some might say there was no justification for killing, no matter who it was, and that even criminals should be judged in a court of law rather than killed, but once that criminal escaped and killed some more, that shot those arguments down, didn't it? If saving this one person resulted in the one she'd saved killing ten or twenty, then saving her wasn't worth it.

Ripple had raced here with the intent to back up Archfiend Pam, but now that she'd arrived, she didn't see her. There was a perfectly circular hole in the center of the road that looked like it had been carved out by some sort of machine, and at its edge was Pythie Frederica, a human collapsed in a puddle of blood, a small, trembling postal delivery–style magical girl, another girl with a rainbow on her back, and a little fairy. There was also a crushed compact car and a foreign car run up on the shoulder of the road.

The former was familiar to Ripple. It was the one they'd used earlier to lead the enemy away from them.

It seemed Frederica and the rainbow magical girl were fighting. Whose side had that dead girl been on? The hole was deep, and Ripple couldn't see the bottom. If Archfiend Pam was around, she had to be down there.

She'd met the girl with a rainbow on her back last night. But she seemed completely different now. She smiled just like the fairy popping out of her shirt did, and under her cuteness lay something dreadful and repulsive. She looked at Ripple not with the eyes of a girl in flight but with the eyes of a girl coming to capture and devour. The cowboy-style magical girl who had worn a tilted ten-gallon hat rose in her mind, and Ripple's mental evaluation of this girl changed from "someone who seems antagonistic" to "definitely an enemy."

Ripple tossed a kunai to repel the rainbow that arced toward her. That girl was using her rainbows differently today, too—not as a running surface but as weapons. The strength she'd used as a foothold before now became the hardness of the weapons that extended toward Ripple.

The rainbows moved in a linear fashion. The flip side of their strength was simplicity. Ripple read them and dodged them easily. She sank her mind a level deeper into the space between herself and her enemy. Her concentration heightened. The sounds of sirens in the distance, approaching them, quieted. All other thoughts, like about how she'd saved Frederica, disappeared. She focused all her five senses on the fight, and now, there was nothing else.

☆ Rain Pow (Time remaining: ten hours, ten minutes)

Kaori Ninotsugi was good at hiding her true feelings. If not, she probably wouldn't have survived her mere thirteen years.

Kaori lived together with her sister, who was significantly older than her. Her sister said their parents had died in an accident, but Kaori didn't know if that was true or not. She didn't even know if her sister was actually related to her in the first place. She called herself Kaori's sister, and the people in the neighborhood, who had known her for a long time, acknowledged her as the oldest girl of the Ninotsugi family, but despite this, Kaori didn't feel they were

related.

The story went that after their parents' accident, her noble sister had been forced to drop out of college and work herself to the bone in order to take care of her little sister. Kaori, however, just couldn't accept that as the truth. Maybe she'd dropped out of college because it didn't suit her or because she didn't have enough credits. Maybe their parents' death had been planned. Maybe she'd taken in Kaori because she wanted a toy she could treat however she liked. Kaori couldn't help but think these things.

Her sister put up a good front, but inside the home, she was a tyrant. If anything displeased her, she would take it out on Kaori. If something unpleasant happened at work, she would take it out on Kaori, and even if nothing in particular was wrong, she would find fault with Kaori.

Her outer demeanor meant she didn't let anything leak out. She never did anything that would show on her face. She would stab Kaori with sewing needles, since they were small enough that they wouldn't leave a mark, make her take cold baths in the middle of winter, pull her hair, smother her with pillows and not release her until she'd just about suffocated, persistently torment her in a quiet voice, grab her tongue with pliers and tug at it, withhold meals, or beat her just gently enough that it wouldn't leave visible bruises. This sort of thing went on two or three times a week, and when it was bad, every day.

It all depended on her sister's mood. She had to put her sister in a good mood. If anything annoyed her, it would all come back at Kaori. So she couldn't fall behind in her studies. She couldn't be bullied. She had to get through school without a hitch, but she couldn't be too exceptional, either. Her sister was very jealous and didn't like it if Kaori was too highly esteemed. When Kaori won special selection at an art competition, her sister ripped up the certificate and rewarded her with a fist, telling her not to get too full of herself, ordering her to pretend she'd lost the certificate. The only certificates Kaori was allowed to have were "no cavities" and "perfect attendance." With everything else, she would be barely safe at third or fifth place, but depending on her sister's mood, even that was out. Acclaim was a threat to her sister, so it was best not to accept any.

Kaori hid what she felt inside and made sure no one knew the truth. It was no simple feat to evade her deeply suspicious and

observant sister's gaze, but she acquired this skill in hiding who she was in order to survive.

Never making it too blatant, she would placate her sister, avoiding standing out in school while simultaneously maintaining a status there where she would not be tyrannized—and it was no exaggeration to call her position at school a "status." She'd made an effort to win it—and in the position she'd won, she cleaved to the majority, showing few faults but also few virtues, taking care not to look like she was just following the crowd or doing whatever it took to get ahead. She spoke in a muted tone when greeting her neighbors. Her sister wanted to be the competent elder sister and for Kaori to be the somewhat lacking younger one.

Kaori's efforts continued into the second semester of her fifth year of elementary school—and ended there.

"You have magical talent. I'm gonna make you into a real magical girl!"

The fairy Toko made Kaori into the magical girl Rain Pow. Before long, a chance "accident" caused her sister to fall down the stairs and twist her ankle, and she missed three days of work. Following that, she never touched Kaori again. She didn't even talk to Kaori at home. She always looked at her little sister with terror in her eyes, and every time Kaori felt that frightened gaze on her, she basked in joy.

Kaori was free. She bought the clothing she wanted, bought video game consoles, bought accessories with real gemstones, and went to a private middle school, and there was no one who would attack her for it anymore.

Toko said Kaori could become her ideal magical girl.

"Sly, dirty, mean, unfair, and calculated. That's the magical girl I've always wanted."

"That doesn't sound like a compliment. You're totally dissing me, aren't you? Like, are you trying to start a fight with me?"

"That's a compliment, for real! I'm saying I've got mad respect for you!"

Sly, dirty, mean, unfair, and calculated. Those are all words that fit Toko, she thought. Toko was two-faced—in fact, she could easily pull three or four faces. She made sloppy reports to the Magical Kingdom with nothing but praise for the magical girls she scouted and lived a life in service of her own benefit. Unsurprisingly, she had a terrible reputation.

After doing job after job for Toko, Kaori came to realize something. She was smiling and joking around naturally. Was this what having fun felt like? Toko lied to everyone. The one exception was Kaori—Rain Pow. She revealed everything to her, be it her fraudulent modus operandi or the foul way she conducted herself. Toko seemed to enjoy herself, and Kaori was enjoying herself, too. Just conning people on its own wouldn't be this fun. It was having someone with you to enjoy it that made it great.

Toko's ideal magical girl was someone similar to herself, maybe because that was the sort of partner Toko wanted.

Toko's training made Rain Pow stronger. Through many scams and battles and much practice, she polished her skills and cultivated her strategic intuition.

Archfiend Pam had conveniently finished off the magical girl who had been fighting one-on-one with her, and Rain Pow had killed Archfiend Pam. She'd also killed the girl who'd been spraying music notes from outside the hole, and Frederica would follow her soon enough. Her one mistake had been letting the fencer escape, but if her weapon was a sword, she wouldn't be someone Rain Pow couldn't fight due to poor compatibility. That fencer could swing her sword all she wanted, but Rain Pow would do fine just shooting rainbows at her from a distance.

And everyone left were either allies, or wounded, or enemies who weren't a threat. She would kill this ninja first. She was one of those cooperating with the inspection team—Ripple, huh?

Rain Pow pointed five rainbows at the ninja, extending them in straight lines, then manifested three more behind her and four more above.

☆ **Weddin (Time remaining: ten hours, nine minutes)**

She ran from alley to alley, fleeing. She didn't know what had happened in that hole or why Pukin had undone her magic—she just kept on running.

The haze that had clouded her mind had cleared even more suddenly than it had appeared. Violence never seeks permission to begin or end.

Though she'd been in a vaguely dazed state of mind, as if her

mind were filled with fog, she could remember everything clearly. She'd waited upon Pukin—revered her, never questioning it, feeling it was an honor to be by her side. She'd been proud of it.

Now that the magic was undone, she couldn't understand English anymore, but she still remembered what she'd seen and heard in Japanese. The memories were very bitter. She'd never tried to stop that group from killing, and whenever Pukin's sword had stabbed someone's chest, she'd trembled with the joy of serving someone so great.

It was nauseating. If she weren't a magical girl, she would have puked right there.

Weddin was self-interested and calculated and was satisfied as long as she had something to gain in the end, and she liked that she operated based on such ideas. Even when she'd become a magical girl, an ally of justice, she'd figured she could use her magic for her own purposes. She'd thought that it was no big deal, as long as she didn't get found out. You obeyed the law because people in power made you obey it. If there was no overwhelmingly powerful figure to punish you—if you were an overwhelmingly powerful figure yourself—then you stood outside the law, and you could live more comfortably.

Looking back on those thoughts now, she knew she'd just been putting on a tough act. Being thrown in among those who actually did crush the weak, for the first time, Weddin had come to know her own ethics. Even this cynical middle school student did in fact hold justice in her heart. She never wanted to experience something like that, ever again.

Once the spell was undone, Weddin's immediate priority was to protect herself, so she quickly escaped to an alleyway. Her sense that she had to meet up with some others intensified. Spending time with Pukin's party had earned her a lot of information. Their party had infiltrated the city in order to capture an assassin. There was also a legitimate inspection team aside from Pukin's group, and they were chasing after the assassin, too. And the assassin's cooperator was the fairy, Toko.

That meant that Toko had been using them all. The assassin was either one of their own or it was someone else. Pukin and her allies had come to the conclusion that it wasn't Funny Trick. They'd also said Captain Grace was dead.

Weddin clenched her fists. Her nails dug into her palms, but she

kept squeezing, hard.

In her mind, Weddin had looked down on Umi Shibahara, famous at school for being a problem child. Even after they'd become magical girls, they'd clashed more than once. They'd competed over the vote to be leader. Weddin had been averse to Grace, and Grace probably hadn't felt very positively about her, either.

But thinking about Grace now filled her with frustration and regret. Grace had been the strongest of all their allies. Weddin had made light of her, seeing her as ultimately just a muscle-brain and not leader material, but she now felt like, in the end, she had relied on Grace. It had been the same back when Bunny Ears had been chasing them. Captain Grace had been the one to come save Weddin and Tepsekemei, who had just kept running.

Oh.

Bunny Ears. And the ninja. They were the official inspection team Pukin's group had talked about, weren't they? They had been different from Pukin's crowd. And there was Archfiend Pam, too. She'd saved Bunny Ears, who'd been beaten to a pulp. So those two had to be allies.

From the way the ninja had pinned her down using her kunai, Weddin could tell she hadn't meant to kill. And Bunny Ears had tied her up, too, and Weddin had never feared for her life.

They were different from Pukin's group. Their side was different from those who killed for their own benefit, enjoying it and smiling over it all the while. She would be able to cooperate with them.

She should not only be meeting up with her allies. There might be other people on that inspection team, aside from Archfiend Pam, Bunny Ears, and the ninja. If she were to cooperate with people like that—Weddin thought as she ran, and nearly got hit by a car. Startled, she dodged it and darted back into the alley. She was breathing a sigh of relief when she raised her head and her eyes met with someone else's.

It was a magical girl wearing a stage magician–style costume. She must have been following Weddin, because when Weddin suddenly turned around, they were face-to-face.

"Funny Trick?" Weddin called out to her questioningly without a second thought, but Funny Trick spun around and tried to run away. Panicking, Weddin called out to stop her. "Funny Trick!

Wait!”

Funny Trick stopped suddenly, right on the spot. Her knees were shaking. Was she perhaps trying to run but couldn’t? Now Weddin knew her magical ability to compel people to keep promises was still active. The promise they’d all made before to obey their leader’s orders when the time came was keeping Funny Trick from moving.

“That magical girl Pukin had me under her control. Either she’s dead, or she cast her magic on someone else. Either way, I don’t know, but I’m no longer under her spell. You don’t have to worry. Also, um, I was personally unwilling about it all, though that does rather sound like I’m making excuses. I’m sorry I didn’t save you.” She bowed her head. She spent several seconds staring at a weed growing from a crack in the concrete, then lifted her head again. Funny Trick was still facing the opposite direction, but her knees weren’t shaking anymore.

“I know this is all quite sudden, but I’d like to ask you a question. Please tell me the truth. Are you the assassin Pukin’s party is chasing?”

Funny Trick’s head moved. She shook it. Weddin had ordered her to tell the truth, so this meant Funny Trick wasn’t the assassin. She turned around, and Weddin held her breath. Tears were pouring from her eyes, running down her cheeks to drip off her chin.

Taking one firm step after another, Weddin approached her, spread both arms, and wrapped her in a tight hug. Weddin heard a tiny sob—Funny Trick was crying, too. The two of them continued to sob as they embraced each other.

“It’s *not* going to end like this… I won’t let it end like this,” Weddin declared—to herself as much as the other girl.

☆ Rain Pow (Time remaining: ten hours, seven minutes)

She was at a loss as to how to continue. This really wasn’t good.

Ripple had dodged the rainbows that came at her from behind with a leap and kicked the ones that appeared from the ground before smacking away with her sword the ones that shot out from above. Meanwhile, Rain Pow kept handling incoming kunai and shuriken with her rainbows.

Countless rainbows and shuriken crisscrossed every which way—so many that they buried the space between them, knocking into one another. The two magical girls maintained a fixed distance from each other as they continued the two-way barrage, either preventing the other from approaching.

Rain Pow had fought this ninja once before, during the attack on the apartment. Rain Pow had been fleeing atop her rainbow and burdened with Postarie, too. Back then, the ninja had thrown plenty of kunai at her and she'd kicked them all down, but now, the throwing weapons were coming much harder and faster. Before, Ripple must have just seen Rain Pow as a middle school kid who had been deceived by Toko, but now, she was a dangerous criminal.

She wasn't at all humiliated that Ripple had held back with her. She was angry at herself for being so naive as to assume that was the enemy's full strength. Her opponent was handicapped. She was missing an arm and an eye. Rain Pow had seen her not as a victor but as a survivor.

She beat down the kunai that flew at her with her rainbows, which couldn't be chipped. Their strength was absolute. Their stability, however, was proportionate to the size of the rainbow. Smaller rainbows would waver just by being hit by kunai, but the larger ones she used to defend herself would block her field of vision, so she had no choice but to use multiple thinner ones. And since Ripple's kunai flew along extremely irregular trajectories, Rain Pow couldn't block them all just by placing static shields. She had to generate a continuous stream of multiple rainbows and always be moving them around.

The two of them ran around the giant hole that Archfiend Pam had created, firing rainbows, throwing kunai, always in motion and never stopping, going so fast it was hard to breathe, never mind getting any time to rest.

Some forms of magical-girl weapons were unlimited: bows that would always have more arrows in the quiver, no matter how many you fired; sunflower seeds that never disappeared, no matter how many you ate; or throwing knives that were never exhausted, no matter how many you threw. Ripple's shuriken and kunai had to be like that. Although she kept throwing more and more of them, there was no sense at all that she would run out.

The trajectories of her shuriken and kunai were infinite in variation, too, and all Rain Pow could do was block them manually.

Rain Pow's rainbows did not manifest suddenly in their completed form, so in order to use them to attack or defend, they had to be stretched out. That caused a delay. Her rainbows could only extend in a mostly straight line or at most a gentle curve, but they couldn't make sharp curves or turn at a right angle, all of which made their movements easy to read. They emitted no heat or sound, and that lack of a giveaway was their strength, making them the best weapon for assassination, but it was harder to make good use of them when fighting head-to-head.

Rain Pow was gradually being pushed back, and Ripple's movements grew fiercer. Rain Pow had assumed Ripple's left side would be a blind spot, but when Ripple dodged attacks from that side just the same as she had from the right, that assumption was torn apart. Ripple flawlessly compensated for her blind spots with her speed. The way her vision caught sight of everything around her was phenomenal.

Her left arm was missing, which basically meant that she had only one or two ways of guarding, maybe even fewer. She was compensating for it by using shuriken thrown from her right hand. Right when a rainbow aiming for her left side manifested, she would throw a shuriken at it to slow its generation.

Ripple had clearly been dealing with this handicap for many years and had devised a way of fighting based around her capabilities.

The road was being buried in shuriken and kunai. At this rate, Rain Pow would be outpushed. The number of her rainbows was unlimited, but the brain that controlled them only had finite capacity. Ripple's shuriken put her on the defensive, forcing her to let up on offense. Doing this gradually drove her into a vicious cycle where even more shuriken came flying at her. She couldn't run. Rain Pow was willing to sell her stubbornness or pride at half price, but she wanted to avoid flight, since she could well be chased down into a constricted space like a residential or urban area. The easiest place for her to use her rainbows was an open space. It was better to fight here than to be pursued by homing shuriken in a more complex environment.

Toko stirred, and Rain Pow gently pushed her down from over her clothing. It was okay. She still had options. If Ripple was a good magical girl, then Rain Pow would still have a card to play.

Rain Pow would drag someone in—it didn't matter who. It

could be an ambulance, or a police car, or some rubberneckers coming to see what was going on. If some normal person came strolling along, Rain Pow would attack them. If that upset Ripple's assault, then Rain Pow would have this. She could also push someone into the hole. Ripple would have to jump into the hole in order to save the good citizen, and Rain Pow would be free to use that moment to attack or flee—whatever she wanted.

Toko stirred again. "Rain Pow, this is strange. It's been quite some time, but there are no police cars or ambulances coming."

Rain Pow had assumed the fight had thrown off her sense of time, when in fact, it seemed time had indeed passed. Quite a lot of it, actually, even since she'd first thought someone should be coming soon.

Rain Pow realized that Pythie Frederica was gone. She'd figured Frederica didn't matter. It had seemed she wasn't going to use her magic, and she wasn't on Ripple's side, either, so she'd let her be. But would she have just run and left it at that?

Crooked recognized crooked.

Someone had figured Ripple would hold back if regular civilians arrived, and so this person was getting in their way, making sure police, ambulances, and civilians would not come. That someone was the crooked type who didn't mind killing people as long as it would get in Rain Pow's way. They would probably do anything to slow her down.

Rain Pow realized her mistake. She should have finished off Frederica immediately. Unlike Ripple, she'd had no way to deal with so many rainbows flying at her simultaneously, from all directions. Rain Pow should have dealt with her quickly to prepare for a one-on-one fight with Ripple.

She had been arrogant. After Sonia died, Rain Pow had killed Pam and badly wounded Pukin. She'd become drunk on her own strength. She'd not taken Ripple seriously, and she'd taken the ability she'd seen when they'd fought at the apartment at face value. Now she could accept it: Ripple was a notch above Rain Pow. She was another who, like Archfiend Pam and Sonia, Rain Pow would have to set up, perfectly and properly, before finishing her off.

Ripple flew through the air.

—No, that wasn't right.

It was her kunai. She'd changed the trajectory of her kunai so

they flew like boomerangs, throwing them to return to her and then hopping atop the kunai as they came back to move through the air in order to dodge rainbows. What sort of training did you have to do to be able to pull something like that?

Toko had said Rain Pow could become her ideal magical girl—not that she was *currently* her ideal magical girl.

In other words, it still wasn't enough.

Rain Pow manifested a rainbow shield, but the shuriken traced a V-shaped trajectory to avoid it. Instantly, Rain Pow shot a rainbow from her other palm to smack them down. All the while, her feet were constantly in motion as she ran atop another rainbow.

Suddenly, she saw something creeping along the ground in the corner of her eye, and while running, she gave it a glance.

It was Postarie. She wasn't trying to run away. She was moving around the hole, crawling like a worm to avoid the shuriken and rainbows that crisscrossed over her head. Rain Pow had assumed that even if she could use Postarie as a hostage against the middle school group, she couldn't do that with Ripple, so she'd just left Postarie alone. What was she trying to do?

Postarie was streaming tears as she wailed out loud, crawling along pathetically with a huge pile of shuriken and kunai in her arms. Ripple gave her a puzzled look.

At that moment, every one of the shuriken and kunai that Postarie held grew wings.

Ripple had seen this magic more than once. She must have realized what Postarie was trying to do.

Ripple threw three shuriken and five kunai all at once in Postarie's direction, but her bewilderment made her throw weak. Her tools were repelled by rainbows and never reached their target.

The winged kunai and shuriken flew for their owner all at once.

Holding her ninja sword in her mouth, Ripple grabbed and threw shuriken with her right hand, and even tried to throw her geta in an attempt to intercept them, but there were just too many shuriken and kunai flying back in her direction.

Those winged shuriken and kunai, which wove through the ninja's net of interception, pierced her cheeks, jaw, shoulders, sides, and chest, one after another. One stuck in her throat, making her stagger wildly. She was no longer able to intercept or avoid any more attacks; her whole body was decorated like a pincushion. Finally, her transformation evaporated, and she turned back into a

girl in a coat, falling into the pit.

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: nine hours, fifteen minutes)

Mana restarted the healing magic ritual they'd been in the middle of. However, it didn't succeed.

The hand in 7753's grasp gradually grew cold. She squeezed it, rubbed it, and called out to the girl, but the warmth did not return. 7753 tried looking through her goggles, to see if she could find some kind of hint, but couldn't bear to see every number value falling before her eyes and turned them off. Hana was too badly wounded, had lost too much blood. No longer able to withstand it, she returned to human form and quietly passed away.

7753 sobbed, still holding Hana's hand. Hana had been wounded, but in spite of that, she'd gotten to her feet. Judging that 7753 and Mana wouldn't be able to escape, she'd resisted as best she could and focused the enemy's attack on herself. If not for her, both 7753 and Mana would've been killed.

The instructions from 7753's boss had backfired. Who could have predicted that the place they'd carried her to where they could safely heal her would be somewhere Pukin would coincidentally come by? It was too cruel.

In death, Hana's face was peaceful. She had to be in her early teens. There was a calmness to her, even as a magical girl. She'd supported them all in various ways, going through all the members of the inspection team—soothing the emotional Mana and showing consideration to 7753 and Ripple, the outside help who'd come butting in.

7753 wiped her tears with her sleeve. She wasn't in the sort of position where she would be allowed to just sit there and cry. Mana would obviously be grieving more than 7753, who had only just met Hana the day before. Mana had cried and gotten emotional simply over losing contact with Hana. So now, 7753 had to support her. 7753 turned back to Mana, ready to try to soothe her, even a little, and she wouldn't even mind getting punched if that was what it came to—and discovered Mana was suddenly in her underwear. Her long, faint-pink camisole was bare of ornaments aside from a small ribbon. It was wholesome and cute, and it made the bizarre image of a girl undressing in a back alley stand out all the more

particularly.

7753 reached out a hand, about to ask just what she was doing, and stopped. Mana's face was serious. She wasn't grumpy. She wasn't angry. She wasn't even grieving. Her expression said she was thinking seriously about what she was about to accomplish.

From her bag, Mana pulled out her magical school uniform and black cape, silently fastening the buttons and hooks, then put on the large three-cornered hat, and finally took up the twisted staff. 7753 watched without a word until Mana was done getting changed. 7753 was spellbound. It was so natural for a mage to be putting on a mage's costume, but this felt truly right. The phrase "dressed to kill" popped into her mind, and then she realized that in this case, that may have literally been the goal, and her voice shook. "U-um… Mana… Where are you—?"

"I'm gonna kill her."

7753 didn't need to ask who. She just spread her arms and stood in front of Mana. "Didn't you see how good she was? Even with my help, we'd just get killed regardless."

"Move." Mana's eyes were glassy. The inspection team chief who'd said she wouldn't let them kill the criminal, that they would ensure she was judged under the law, was gone. All that stood there was a girl who meant to get revenge for her friend through vigilantism.

Mana pointed her staff at 7753 and, overwhelmed, 7753 staggered back. Mana was muttering something under her breath. Her free left hand was forming a series of complicated sigils. Was she going to remove what stood in her way by force?

7753 placed her trembling right hand on the end of the staff and gently moved the tip away from her. Her hand wasn't the only thing trembling. Her voice was, too. But she had to say this. "Why do you think Hana volunteered for this job?"

Mana was more stubborn than rock, and 7753 had assumed she wouldn't listen to a word she said, but now, she gulped. That interrupted her spell, and 7753 blew a rather deep sigh.

"How did you know about that?"

"Hana told me, when you went to go shopping at the convenience store." This was a lie. Hana hadn't said anything like that. This information was all brought from her boss and displayed in her goggles.

Hana had not originally been assigned to this job. When she'd

found out that Mana, who had only three inspections' worth of experience, would be in charge, she had volunteered. Mana's father had been the examiner who oversaw Hana's magical-girl exam, and she'd had a connection with their family ever since becoming a magical girl. It was also Mana's father who had given Hana her magical-girl name, Hana Gekokujou. So he was like a godfather to her.

7753 could see it, somehow. They must have been like sisters. The elder went to help, unable to abandon her inexperienced younger sister, who was irritated but, privately, also glad. From how he had given her the name Hana, a name so similar to Mana's, 7753 could tell how Mana's father had seen Hana.

"If you try to kill her, you'll be the one who ends up dead. You can't win."

"So I can't win. So what?"

"If you can't win, then you're dying for nothing. It would make Hana's…sacrifice meaningless. She tried to protect you. That was why she volunteered for this, wasn't it?"

Mana opened her mouth and started to say something but then closed it again without a word. She scrunched her big triangle hat in her fist, then threw it on the ground. She cast her gaze downward, shoulders trembling.

7753 was taking advantage of Mana's feelings for Hana. But she just had to convince her. She honestly didn't want Mana to die. Hana had tried to keep Mana alive. 7753 wanted to make sure that, at the very least, her attempt didn't go to waste.

7753 was about to continue when she saw a message displayed in her goggles, and the words died in her mouth.

Archfiend Pam is deceased.

An impact ran from her head to her toes, as if she'd been beaten with a hammer. Her knees felt ready to crumple, but she stiffened them and endured it, somehow.

Her death was confirmed by a recording device installed on her person by the Department of Diplomacy. Trends within the department are leaning to treating this as a level-one magical crime. I've also heard tell that there is a proposal to deploy a weapon of

mass destruction once the barrier falls in order to bring the situation under control.

A weapon of mass destruction. If they were to use something like that, it wouldn't just be the magical girls in the city—even normal citizens would be indiscriminately slaughtered. Was something like that even allowed?

They were counting on Archfiend Pam, and now that she's dead, the Department of Diplomacy is running off the rails. They're bound to act recklessly and in desperation. I want you to do whatever it takes to resolve the incident before the barrier falls. If you can just subdue the assassin and the prisoners, then the department will be unable to see their plan through. If you don't have enough combatants with you right now—

Combatants… Oh, that's right. Ripple.

She had gone to save Archfiend Pam. If Archfiend Pam was dead, then what had happened to Ripple? If Ripple was in danger, 7753 wanted to save her. But just how much help would she and Mana be?

7753's thoughts were swimming. She didn't know what she should do or think. She was just obeying the instructions displayed in her goggles.

"Just the two of us alone can't win. It'd be impossible for us to catch the assassin or defeat Frederica's party. We should propose a united front with the middle school group Toko tricked…with Kuru-Kuru Hime and the others."

☆ **Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: nine hours, forty-five minutes)**

Since she couldn't call for an ambulance and had no way of resuscitating him, Nozomi did nothing. She just sat in front of her father. She could tell by looking that either choice would be pointless anyway. Her father's head had been severed from his body.

He was in his pajamas, his body collapsed right outside the bedroom, facing the front door. Maybe he'd noticed a noise and had

gone to see what was up, figuring Nozomi must have come home.

He had been taciturn and unsociable, and Nozomi had never really known what he was thinking, even though she was his daughter. He'd never proactively tried to communicate. Whenever Nozomi spoke to him, he would give the minimum necessary response. He'd been curt in everything.

Even when they had gone on outings together to tourist spots or amusement parks or other places to spend "family time," her father had never particularly seemed as if he were enjoying himself, dispassionate at all times. When Nozomi and her mother waved at him from the merry-go-round, he would turn to look but nothing more.

By contrast, her mother had been a lively person. She was the one who'd encouraged Nozomi when she had shown no indication of growing, despite being the age she was. Her mother was the one who had watched TV with her and laughed together with her.

Her mother had been close with their neighbors and had worked on the neighborhood association, since apparently nobody else wanted to do it. When Nozomi came home from school, it was commonplace for a neighbor to be in the living room, chatting with her mother. Her father never brought over anyone from work.

As their daughter, Nozomi couldn't have helped but be concerned about whether her parents were getting along, as a couple. How had they ended up married? At the very least, she thought it couldn't have been an arranged marriage. Or had either of them—or both of them—been faking it up until they'd said their vows? It wasn't like they had any big fights, but they didn't seem like passionate lovebirds, either. The two of them had led very normal lives with no great mishaps, until eventually her mother became bedridden with illness.

That was when, finally, Nozomi discovered that her father did love her mother, and she was able to reaffirm that she loved her parents, too. It was ironic that she only found that out once her mother was so sick.

She'd assumed that next, it would be time to take care of her father. But now, that time would never come.

The blood soaking her knees was already cold. The light flowing in through the window told her that night was turning to dawn. Kuru-Kuru Hime forgot Pythie Frederica might be after her and just sat there in front of her father, not keeping an eye out for a

hand that might suddenly appear from behind. Just how much time had passed? Her smartphone, which she'd wrapped in her ribbons, rang. She answered out of habit.

"This is 7753. Kuru-Kuru Hime, is that you? Are you all right?"

"My father was…murdered."

On the other end, 7753 was shocked silent. Saying it out loud finalized it, and now Kuru-Kuru Hime was struck by the feeling that she couldn't put things back the way they had been. She closed her eyes. She didn't want to look at anything.

"I'm sorry…" 7753 seemed to be forcing the words out. Kuru-Kuru Hime squeezed her eyes shut even harder.

Everything about this had been awful. Not a single good thing. *It would be so easy if I could close my ears as well as my eyes*, she thought.

"Has Frederica attacked since then?"

Kuru-Kuru Hime shook her head, then realized 7753 wouldn't be able to see that and replied, "No."

☆ Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: nine hours, thirty-five minutes)

Frederica was the most trustworthy ally as far as she was concerned. She was servant, master, comrade, and friend. Frederica always worked in service of her own desires, and she understood herself best.

Frederica understood herself and commanded her. In her search for the ideal magical girl, the first one to catch her eye had been Frederica herself, the closest magical girl at hand. Through continuous research, Frederica had sucked herself dry and had quickly bored of her.

Frederica had given up on Frederica. Although she'd always viewed herself through a dispassionate, objective eye, she could not become the ideal magical girl in her own mind. That led her to seek out her ideal image of a magical girl in someone else.

Sonia had been killed, Archfiend Pam murdered; Pukin had fled; Ripple had been stabbed a hundred times over and fallen into the pit; and Rain Pow and Postarie, who had survived, had also fled, leaving just Frederica, who finally emerged from hiding. She searched all over, checking to see if her crystal ball had been

dropped somewhere, but it was nowhere to be found. She even searched Tot Pop, but all she noticed that was different about her was that her magical phone had been equipped with a camera. She must have been using that to continuously provide images to her financial backers. Nothing else here seemed useful, so in the end, Frederica departed the battlefield.

But even in dire straits and fleeing a battlefield—a rare experience for her—Frederica's cheeks were flushed and her heart was pounding. Her excitement laid bare, she jumped from the roof of the hospital.

As Frederica ran along the tiled roofs of private residences, she was racked with excitement. Maybe this could be a revival of her plans of happiness, once abandoned, believing that was not to be for her. The emotions she'd felt when facing off against that rainbow magical girl had opened new possibilities to her. She'd been unable to control herself, neither fleeing nor deceiving but attempting to fight, even without her crystal ball! Lost in the anger! That had never happened to her before. Enraged over her student's death as she faced a powerful opponent… That was just like a good magical girl. The anger she'd felt over Tot Pop's death was already gone, now transformed into joy.

She had thought of this job only as a springboard to freedom, but it *could* become a major turning point. This job might change Frederica.

She had to get out of this alive, no matter what.

First, she would retrieve her crystal ball. Without it, she was essentially helpless. She couldn't perform any reconnaissance, orchestrate any kidnappings, get backup from the outside, and most of all, escape this town.

Funny Trick had to be the thief. Frederica could retrieve her crystal ball by negotiation or theft, as long as she got it back.

Frederica descended from a tiled roof to a parking lot, ran up the wall of the apartment they'd used as their base, and clambered up to the veranda of one of its rooms. Curtains covered the window. It should be open, since she hadn't locked it when they'd left before. She reached out to it, then stopped. She retreated by half a heel, then pushed aside a planter overgrown with weeds.

"Are you well, Your Excellency?" she called through the curtains.

After a full thirty-second pause, there was a reply. "Why did

you hold back?"

"Hold back? Whatever are you talking about?"

"You didn't use your crystal ball against Archfiend Pam. Why not?" Frederica could sense her anger through the window glass and curtains. The room was filled with a murderous air.

She was aware of the tendencies of Pukin's character. No matter how she herself might fail, she would find some external source of blame. And on this occasion, Frederica was not in the position to make much of an excuse.

If she were honest and revealed that her crystal ball had been stolen, Pukin would attack her for not having mentioned it before, and that would also inform Pukin that they could no longer escape the city. Would Pukin forgive that now? Most likely not. And since Tot Pop and Sonia were dead, Frederica no longer had anyone to take her side.

If Frederica were to say she'd chosen not to use her crystal ball, that would be an acknowledgment of her sabotage. That would give Pukin no reason at all to forgive her.

Frederica had anticipated either comforting Pukin over Sonia, or swearing revenge, as fellows who'd both had their partners killed, or reworking their strategy, taking their diminished numbers into account. But Frederica's supposition that she would choose how to start this conversation based on how things looked in the moment had been naive. If Pukin was beginning by questioning why Frederica hadn't used her crystal ball, that essentially meant Pukin was not going to forgive her.

Was Pukin angry over having lost Sonia? No. She was angry at herself for having run away. It had been the best option at the time, yet in spite of that, it was incompatible with Pukin's pride. She was angry at her own choice and looking for a lamb to be her sacrifice—a lamb that could be used for her excuse, to say, *"It's her fault."*

Frederica cleared her throat. "There was a reason for that," she said, then instantly jumped backward over the railing of the veranda and down, as simultaneously, the glass of the window was shattered. On the other side of the tattered curtain was that handsome face—though her nose was horribly crushed—Pukin, twisted in rage. Frederica's calculations had been correct. Pukin's position in the room, her distance from Frederica, the speed of her thrust, the timing: Frederica had read every single element, and she evaded the attack. Pukin's lust for blood was laid bare, and her

motions were rougher than when she'd beheaded those two gas-masked girls in the prison. The additional force and speed behind her thrust made it just that much easier to read where she was going.

Faster than Pukin could lean out from the veranda and look over it, Frederica slipped down onto a different balcony, two floors below.

From here on out, she was on her own. At this point, even that seemed fun.

☆ Weddin (Time remaining: nine hours, three minutes)

"Please calm down and listen to me. First, take some deep breaths," Weddin ordered, forcing Funny Trick to inhale and exhale deeply. Funny Trick's eyes focused properly again, and the color returned to her cheeks. Her voice regained some feeling as well.

This promise, which she'd bullied them into making with the impure motive of possibly using them once the evil mages were driven back, was turning out to be useful. But the only one who could calm Weddin's heart was Weddin herself. Thinking, considering, and guiding was her role as leader. It was nothing like being the class representative. This role was heavy and painful, and she would've thrown it away if she could. If she'd have discarded it ten hours ago, then Captain Grace would gladly have become the leader. But Captain Grace was gone now. Weddin couldn't get rid of her responsibility.

Weddin took the lead, running toward the mountain, and once they were in a thicket at the mountain's foot, she slowed down. She tied her bouquet to the end of a tree branch about as thick as a human arm and thrust it out ahead of them as she walked. After about fifty-odd yards of walking, the bouquet bumped up against empty space.

This was the barrier. Tepsekemei had said she'd touched it, too. To test it, Weddin picked up a rock and tried tossing it underhand. It rolled without any particular resistance beyond the copse of cedar trees. The barrier blocked anything magical—in this case, the bouquet, which was a part of Weddin's costume.

Funny Trick pulled out the plastic bag she'd brought. It wasn't one of the municipal garbage bags, the see-through kind, but an

opaque white plastic bag with a supermarket logo on it. Inside was just an empty can, and the bag was firmly tied shut.

Funny Trick threw the bag. Since it had no magical properties, it went through the barrier with no interference to fall atop the dead leaves. Next, Weddin handed over her bouquet. Funny Trick took off her cape to cover up the flowers.

Now the bouquet was hidden from view. The empty can had been out of their view in the first place, in the plastic bag. Funny Trick knew its contents and its position. This fulfilled the conditions for her magic's use. When she whipped away her cape, what had been a bouquet was now an empty can. And from what they could see of what was inside the plastic bag, the can had transformed, too. It was the bouquet now.

The experiment had been a success. Weddin offered a handshake while Funny Trick held out her hand for a high five, and coming up with mismatched reactions in their hastily constructed partnership, the two of them hugged joyfully instead. Using Funny Trick's magic, they could even get magical things through the barrier. They'd already proven with Postarie that this ability could be used on a magical girl, so now they could escape from the barrier.

The joy of *we can escape safely!* was reduced to the galling realization that they would have to leave Pukin's party behind in order to escape. Funny Trick herself didn't know if they could escape via this method until they tried, and there was still something they were missing.

"The question is, how do we get in contact with the others?"

"Yeah… The magical phones aren't getting through, are they?"

If Weddin were to calculate the profit and loss as she always did, she would get the answer easy enough. As her leader, all Weddin had to do was order Funny Trick to place her outside the barrier with magic. That would guarantee her own safety. She *could* do it, but she didn't feel like it. Captain Grace was still in her mind, kicking up a big fuss and saying, *"We don't need that kinda irresponsible leader! If you're gonna be like that, then let me be leader!"* And even as she thought Grace had been such an aggravating person, when the faces of the other magical girls rose in her mind, she just couldn't bring herself to want to escape alone—even though she understood that, considering in terms of what was most beneficial to her, running would unquestionably be the more

advantageous choice.

She bitterly regretted that they'd never decided on a meetup spot in case of emergencies—though even if they had picked one, that in itself could have been disastrous. If Weddin had spilled that to Pukin, all of them may have been rounded up at once.

Captain Grace had been killed. Remaining were Rain Pow, Postarie, Tepsekemei, Kuru-Kuru Hime, and Toko. The whereabouts of Rain Pow and Postarie had been unknown since the attack on the apartment building, and Frederica had said Kuru-Kuru Hime had been captured by Bunny Ears and was now working with the inspection team. Frederica had some of Kuru-Kuru Hime's hair, so she would spy on her or kidnap her as she pleased, which was also concerning. And Funny Trick told Weddin that when Pukin's party had attacked them, Sonia had attacked Tepsekemei, too.

"Is she…all right?"

"It looked as if she got away…"

"Mei is strong."

Weddin looked toward the voice, immediately wary. In the corner of her eye, she saw Funny Trick doing the same thing. Theirs was a hastily constructed partnership, but it wasn't as if they couldn't work together smoothly.

The Arabian dancer magical girl was there, sitting upside down underneath the thick branch of a cedar tree.

"Tepsekemei!"

"What?"

"Don't *what* me. Just where have you been? What have you been doing?"

"Watching lots of things from the sky." Tepsekemei spun around on the branch, using the pull of gravity to turn right side up. "It's very hard."

"Hard…? What's hard?"

"Mei doesn't really understand who's an enemy and who's a friend."

That much Weddin could agree with.

☆ Rain Pow (Time remaining: eight hours, thirty-seven minutes)

She'd sliced up Archfiend Pam and cut down the magical girl whose

name she didn't know, but the fencer and Frederica had escaped her. The naïveté of her expectations had led to Ripple cornering her, but with some unexpected help, Ripple had been turned into a pincushion.

That unexpected help was now kneeling on the roof of the building where they'd moved to keep out of sight, hanging her head. It wasn't as if Rain Pow had ordered her to sit on her knees. Though night had turned to dawn, even just looking at her kneeling there on a roof in November made Rain Pow feel cold, but the girl had taken up that position of her own volition, so there was no helping it.

Looking down at Postarie, Rain Pow quietly asked Toko, "What's she thinking?"

"Don't ask me. Ask her."

Postarie had saved the very one who'd nastily threatened her, saying, "You're gonna be my hostage later, so I'll let you live for now," and had killed the righteous ninja who had been fighting to save her. Rain Pow couldn't understand it. She couldn't understand the meaning of this, nor could she get a read on what Postarie wanted, and frankly, it was a little scary.

"Hey, Tsuko. Why'd you save me?"

Postarie glanced up at Rain Pow before immediately looking down again.

"…'Cause."

"Hmm? What?"

"'Cause…we're friends."

Postarie said she'd saved Rain Pow because they were friends.

Earlier, Rain Pow and Toko had spoken with provocation, a challenging edge to their words. Objectively speaking, Rain Pow thought they would clearly have looked like bad guys. And on top of that, "I'll let you live now so I can use you as a hostage later" was not something an ally of justice would say. Even the protagonist of some picaresque novel wouldn't do that sort of thing.

In other words, it was obvious Rain Pow was a villain and that the ninja who'd fought her had been one of the good guys. With her intent to make Postarie her hostage, there would be no reason Postarie would want Rain Pow to win.

About six months earlier, Toko and Kaori had figured they should get themselves another magical girl who would back up Kaori if the time came. Another student from Kaori's school was preferable, if possible. Rain Pow would use her as a shield, keeping their real business a secret and treating her kindly as a normal magical-girl friend, while in emergencies, she could use her as cover. This had been the idea when Toko had begun surveying girls, and she'd found about five people in the school with magical talent. Tatsuko had been one of those.

Of all the people whom Toko deemed to have talent, Tatsuko was the only one who had seemed like she would refuse to be a magical girl. Kayo Nemura was rather logical by nature, but Kaori could easily see Umi Shibahara dragging her into it. As for Nozomi Himeno, if Kaori were to make a request as a student, having a sense of teacher's responsibility, Nozomi would accept. But Tatsuko would be the easiest for Kaori to use, since she was the only one in her same grade and class.

And so Kaori had approached Tatsuko Sakaki, deciding to befriend her before making her a magical girl. However, Tatsuko had been even more introverted than she'd imagined, and it had taken time to build their friendship. Right when Tatsuko had finally opened up to her, Toko and Rain Pow's pursuers had caught up to them. And so Toko and Kaori had ended up kick-starting their plans while still in the half-organized stage.

Even if Tatsuko did feel Kaori was her friend, Kaori revealing her true nature would have exposed that befriending Tatsuko had all been an act to use her.

Rain Pow gazed down at Postarie, who looked embarrassed, somehow. Did she really understand why things had ended up like this?

Rain Pow gave Toko a look as if to ask *"What should we do?"* and Toko shook her head, a complicated expression on her face. The way Toko dumped responsibility for things on others was such a pain. Rain Pow waffled for a while, but no matter how she looked at Tatsuko, she didn't seem to be plotting anything. Rain Pow concluded that although she didn't understand it, it seemed Postarie was just an idiot.

Rain Pow reached out to Postarie and pulled her to her feet.

“Yeah… Thanks, Tsuko. You saved me.”

It was best just to leave it at that. She didn’t get what was on Tatsuko’s mind, but it was clear that Kaori could use it. She just had to suck her dry and throw her away. She could still use Postarie.

CHAPTER 11
MY FRIEND

☆ **Tepsekemei (Time remaining: seven hours, ten minutes)**

Mei didn't know who was an enemy and who was a friend. It should have been Weddin and Kuru-Kuru Hime and Rain Pow and Postarie and Captain Grace and Funny Trick and Toko who were her friends, but Weddin was with people she'd thought were enemies, then escaped from the people she'd thought were enemies, and Tepsekemei didn't really understand what was going on.

Other magical girls might understand, she figured, but when she asked Weddin and Funny Trick, she didn't get a clear reply. Nor did she get a clear reply when she asked why Weddin had been with the enemy. She understood she was asking very difficult questions.

"Let's meet up with someone first."

Tepsekemei went into the air to scout someone out. But she just couldn't tell who was an ally and who was an enemy. If they were going to meet up with someone, then who would it be?

Funny Trick's and Weddin's faces were different from usual. When Tepsekemei asked why, they told her, "This is what people look like when they're worried." Tepsekemei didn't really understand worrying, either. It was nothing but difficult things, and she didn't like it.

"Pukin, Sonia, Frederica, and Tot Pop—those four are enemies, no matter what."

"And rabbit ears and the ninja?"

"If what Frederica and the others discussed is true, they're the inspection team. I really doubt they hold us in high regard, but still, they might cooperate… In fact, I think perhaps we *should* cooperate

with them."

"And Toko?"

"She's out. From what Frederica's party said, she tricked us."

"But… Can we believe what they said?"

"Hmm… Good point… But back then I was being controlled, and Funny Trick, you were tied up. Would they go to the trouble to lie in that situation? It's not out of the question, but I believe it's unlikely. Right now, rather than chasing unlikely possibilities, we should think about what's most plausible."

"So then all that's left is Kuru-Kuru Hime, Rain Pow, and Postarie… Right?"

"Do you think Toko's partner is one of us? Or do you think she's someone else?"

"Who knows…?"

Tepsekemei listened to Weddin's explanation. Bunny Ears and the ninja were allies. They *had* been enemies, but for now they were allies. The one who had killed Captain Grace plus her three allies were all enemies. Weddin had been friends with them, but now they were enemies. Toko was an enemy. Postarie, Rain Pow, and Kuru-Kuru Hime were tricky but allies. Tepsekemei didn't quite understand the meaning of the word "tricky," but when she asked, the reply she got was hard to understand. For anyone else, they would decide if they were friend or foe based on who they were with.

"Who are the enemies?"

"The one who killed Captain Grace, the other three who are with her, and Toko."

"And our allies?"

"Bunny and the ninja. And it's tricky, but Postarie, Rain Pow, and Kuru-Kuru Hime."

"Do you know what sort of magical girl Postarie is?"

"She moves ribbons."

Weddin and Funny Trick heaved deep, long sighs.

In the end, they decided that if Tepsekemei caught sight of a magical girl, she was to remember their location and characteristics and then return to the mountain where Weddin and Funny Trick would be. Also, she needed to be careful not to touch the barrier.

Tepsekemei had thought that becoming human would give her more freedom. She'd thought that a magical girl, which was

stronger than a human, would be even freer than that. But in actuality, it was nothing but restrictions. She had to help her allies, and she had to follow the leader's instructions. And their enemies were powerful. These enemies wouldn't run away if you snapped at them.

The black-winged magical girl she had fought in the sky above was strong. Tepsekemei had nearly been frozen. If she'd continued fighting, she would have been killed.

The magical girl who had killed Captain Grace was strong, too. Anyone but Tepsekemei would have died, and even she would have died if she'd taken one more hit.

Tepsekemei decided she would not fight either of those two ever again. No matter what Weddin said, or even if Weddin got mad at her, Tepsekemei would absolutely not fight them. If it came to that, she would carry Weddin and run away.

Tepsekemei thinned out her body, making her appear fainter. Gliding through the sky, it became harder for enemies to find her. If she made herself too thin, she would be blown away in the wind, so she modulated it, flying high in the air as she observed the world below.

There were disturbances happening all over. People were gathering; "cars" were gathering, talking, listening, moving, not moving. There were no magical girls. Where were they? Tepsekemei flew toward the school.

On the way, she saw a road with a circle carved out of it. There were quite a lot of people there and a rope that ran all the way around the hole. No magical girls there.

As she flew, she checked all the places visible from above: the tops of buildings, on top of an iron tower, atop roofs. It just made her eyes tired, and she didn't find anything special.

There was no one on the roof of the school, either. Some humans were running on the sports oval. No magical girls there.

Tepsekemei landed on the roof and sat down, leaning against the wall. She pinched the spot between her eyes in her fingers and rubbed lightly. She'd been using her eyes this whole time, and they were tired.

There wasn't much difference between doing nothing in the air and doing nothing while sitting, so Tepsekemei just sat there and gazed up at the gray clouds. They were no different than they had been the day before. They were thick, and she couldn't see any

higher in the sky. They hid the sun, making it cold. As she looked at them, thinking, *The wind won't blow away the clouds, will it?* something that was not a cloud flew toward her. It looked like a bird but wasn't one. It was something small that moved its wings to fly but was not a bird. As she looked hard at it, it seemed as if it was flying toward her, and it was more interesting to watch than the clouds.

As Tepsekemei continued to observe the flying thing, she realized that it really was headed toward her. Gradually, the outline of the thing became clearer.

It was a lamp, which had sprouted birdlike wings, flying toward her. She knew that lamp. It was the one Captain Grace had given her. Come to think of it, she'd lost it at some point.

She didn't know what made a lamp useful, but being inside it had been calming, so she'd figured that's what it was for.

Slowly and steadily, the flying lamp came closer until it fell lightly into Tepsekemei's hand. The bird wings melted into the air and disappeared. She poked the lamp in her hand, then tried sniffing it. There was no mistaking it. It was that lamp, after all. It still smelled like Tepsekemei.

"Oh, so you came back to the school."

Two magical girls appeared, hopping over the iron fence. Tepsekemei confirmed they were not enemies. However, their names were rather vague in her mind, and she couldn't remember them. She'd just split up with Funny Trick and Weddin. So then one of these was Rain Pow, and the other was Kuru-Kuru Hime?

"Do you know where the other girls are?" A tiny fairy poked her head out from one of the girl's chests. Tepsekemei wouldn't forget this: Toko. Toko was an enemy.

"Toko is an enemy." Tepsekemei voiced her thoughts out loud. When she did this, others would correct her when she was mistaken, and someone would explain to her about what she didn't understand. That was the correct course of action this time, too. The two girls reacted to Tepsekemei's statement, and that told Tepsekemei that her statement wasn't wrong.

Rainbows scissored Tepsekemei from in front and behind, slicing her in half, and Tepsekemei blew a gust of wind, attempting to blast the enemy over the iron railing. Tepsekemei abandoned her lower body and her upper half fled into the sky, from where she shot wind at the two girls and Toko one more time. The more

colorful of the girls braced herself in the wind, but the other one couldn't resist it and was tossed backward. Right before the plain magical girl flew over the iron railing, the fancy-looking one reached out to her, grabbing her friend's arm with her left hand as she gripped the railing with her right, holding on. The sudden motion caused Toko's tiny frame to spill out of her top, and so Tepsekemei focused her wind on Toko, blowing the fairy away until she couldn't see her anymore.

Tepsekemei left both magical girls as they yelled and cried out, before rising high, high into the sky.

☆ Postarie (Time remaining: six hours, thirty-five minutes)

Since Toko couldn't come back on her own, it took quite the effort to search for her after she got blown away. She ended up caught on the branch of a cherry blossom tree, which had been planted in one corner of the schoolyard to commemorate some graduation, wailing shrilly. Postarie reverted to her human form so as not to be noticed by the students out with their sports clubs, approached the tree quietly, instantly transformed again in order to climb the tree and retrieve Toko, then came down and detransformed once more. She checked all around and saw that nobody was paying attention to her. They were focused on running hard. She was relieved.

On top of the roof, Toko and Rain Pow argued.

"Now everyone knows that you're a bad guy, Toko."

"Huh? Why're you saying that like it's my fault?"

"'Cause it *is* your fault. Everyone's all cautious of us because they know you're the bad guy!"

"But you're the bad guy, too, Rain Pow."

"I haven't been found out, though."

"Why d'you have to make it like I'm the only one at fault here?"

"I mean, this *is* all your fault. Now we can't meet up with any of the others."

Though it seemed like they were trying to blame this on each other and shouting each other down, they weren't seriously angry. You could tell that much easily, just watching them. As they argued, their facial expressions and tones of voice clearly never left the realm of good humor. They were enjoying it.

This had to be what friends were. Toko and Rain Pow were

friends. So what did they think of Postarie? Rain Pow had said she thought of her as a friend. Postarie had decided not to think about whether or not she really felt that way.

Never once before had a classmate needed Tatsuko Sakaki. She'd been alone from preschool to elementary school to middle school. When they'd gone on school outings, she'd eaten the rice balls her mother made for her all by herself. When they were deciding groups for school field trips, after everyone else had settled in groups, she would be assigned to whichever group didn't have enough people.

She'd taken it for granted that things would be this way and felt it was easier to spend time alone. Solitude formed the foundation, while being in groups took effort. It was a pain having to take care not to end up isolated, to smile to flatter people, to be forced to watch popular TV shows she didn't care about in order to keep up with the conversation. If people weren't going to bother with her, Tatsuko took no issue with that. As long as it didn't develop into bullying, that was fine. If they just laughed at her sometimes, like, *"She's always alone, huh?"* then she could suck it up.

After befriending Kaori, Tatsuko concluded that friends really were a bother, after all. Talking, smiling, hanging out, and doing things together was all more troublesome than being alone—but it was really fun.

Friends were a curse. Tatsuko didn't want Kaori to abandon her. Before, she'd taken it for granted that she wouldn't have friends. It had been normal for her. But now, having friends was normal and something she took for granted. She'd say hi like it was normal, eat lunch together like it was normal, and they'd invite each other over to each other's houses after school like it was normal.

Without Kaori, she would lose that normalcy.

Toko was a liar, and Rain Pow was her accomplice. Rain Pow had said she wouldn't kill Postarie for now, since she was going to make her a hostage. That wasn't the sort of thing you'd say to a friend.

But Postarie had gone and saved Rain Pow. She sort of understood that the ninja had probably been on the right side of things and that Rain Pow and Toko were probably the real "evil mages," but she'd saved Rain Pow anyway. When she'd seen that ninja trying to defeat her, Postarie had taken action. She hadn't wanted Rain Pow to die.

As a result, Postarie had killed the ninja. She'd killed the one doing the right thing.

Postarie didn't feel much shock over the fact of having killed her. She was actually a little gleeful at having done something bad, the same sort of thing Rain Pow and Toko, the villains, did. And she was shocked at herself for being glad about it.

Postarie was clinging to the possibility that Rain Pow saying she'd make Postarie her hostage had just been a convenience for use in that moment. It had to have been just something she'd blurted out in order to ensure the ninja wouldn't attack Postarie. She was clinging to Rain Pow so hard, she was even trying to deceive herself with these implausible fantasies. She wanted to believe that she'd not made the wrong choice, at least.

Toko and Rain Pow were arguing about who was at fault. Feeling and hoping strongly that she was part of their group, Postarie smiled.

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: six hours, seventeen minutes)

"Whatever unbending convictions or principles you may have, bend them, just this once," Mana told her. She said this as someone who had abandoned her own convictions and principles. And she wasn't wrong in that. "This is an order from the team chief. Use your goggles on everyone, no matter who they are."

"…Understood."

"Even if it's someone you've seen before, don't let your guard down. We don't know how the situation may have changed. Some people might mean well but do crazy things. Don't make an exception for even a single person."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Not even for me."

"Wait, but—"

"You can't trust me just because I'm me. Don't forget that there's someone here with mind-control abilities. Nobody's gonna commend you for getting stabbed in the back."

"Yes, ma'am… I understand."

7753 couldn't look at herself through her own goggles. In other words, if she were to lie in her reports, then nobody could nail her for it. Mana knew that and was still ordering her to use her goggles

without exception. It was no different from saying she intended to die together with 7753. Mana was telling her that she would take the leap of faith that 7753 was not an informant, so she should handle things in the easiest way possible.

Mana had been antagonistic, mean, and angry, had grabbed her by the collar, and had yelled at 7753 and Ripple, the outsiders, but in spite of all that, she was now saying she would trust 7753.

If the reason for that was that Hana had told 7753 about her relationship with Mana, then this basically meant 7753 was deceiving her. Her boss had given her that information, and she'd been ordered to say that and had done so. That was all. Hana had never trusted 7753 to the point where she would talk about her personal relationships.

In contrast with 7753's sinking feelings, Mana was moving briskly.

Pukin had killed Hana, and after 7753 had stopped Mana from immediately seeking revenge, Mana had become restrained. She'd made the calculated judgment that if 7753 were to betray her, then she would lose, no matter how she struggled, so she'd decided to trust 7753 and was aiming to use her powers to the fullest. Hana had died in battle, and her trust in 7753 had to be a big part of this. 7753 couldn't help but feel miserable.

Mana was not a magical girl. She hadn't had a wink of sleep, so she had to be exhausted, but she didn't show it. Her hair was a mess, she was covered in dust, and her glasses were cracked, but she was still standing firmly. When she gave orders to 7753, there was drive in her voice, and 7753 could see no hesitation in her.

7753 would even have preferred that Mana not trust her. She wasn't actively betraying Mana, but she was essentially passively betraying her. 7753 had received orders from her boss, and she was hiding that fact. She was hiding that Archfiend Pam was dead, she wasn't telling them that Pam's death was driving the Department of Diplomacy into chaos, and she wasn't saying anything about the weapon of mass destruction that might hit the town. She was trying to keep Mana, the team chief, in the dark about it all.

She wanted to talk to Mana. She wanted to tell her. But her boss's instructions remained firm: "don't talk to her" and "don't tell her." No matter how 7753 tried to convince her, her boss wouldn't listen. Mana and her boss were similar in that they both believed they were doing the right thing. At this point, just what was 7753

trying to protect?

They met up with Kuru-Kuru Hime again on the roof of the radio station, and 7753 didn't even have to look through her goggles to know she was haggard. 7753 knew about what had happened. She couldn't think of what to say.

Kuru-Kuru Hime held out a smartphone to her. "I got a call. She said to call back…"

"A phone call? From who? A student?"

Kuru-Kuru Hime silently shook her head and pushed the phone toward her again. It was as if she was saying she didn't want it.

When 7753 checked the call history, she saw that there had just been a call from another cell phone. Was this the one she was meant to call back? 7753 pressed redial, and before the first ring was even over, they picked up.

"Is this Kuru-Kuru Hime?" It was a girl with a sonorous voice. She sounded young, but there was something mature about her tone, too. She was either a magical girl who was an adult, pretransformation, or one who was still a child but had had a long career. Those conditions applied to none of Kuru-Kuru Hime's allies.

7753 gave Mana a look. Eyes narrowing, Mana listened carefully.

After a moment of hesitation, 7753 replied, "No, this is 7753."

"7753? The one from Magical Girl Resources?"

"…Yes. I'm with the inspection team now."

This girl knew about 7753. Her voice was unfamiliar. She'd managed to call Kuru-Kuru Hime's smartphone. 7753 couldn't think of anyone to whom all this could apply. "Who might this be?"

"My name is Pythie Frederica."

7753 drew her face away from the phone and closed her eyes. This brand-name phone now looked to her like some abominable magical artifact. She looked over at Mana and saw an expression of sincere disgust on her face, one eye scrunched.

Mana stole the phone from her. "Just what the hell do you want with us, Frederica?"

"Who is this?"

"Mana, the team chief."

"Oh, so this is Chief Mana? That works out perfectly."

If Frederica was the one talking, that explained why Kuru-Kuru Hime didn't want to touch the phone.

"Might you and I cooperate?" Frederica's voice was

inappropriately sunny.

"Cooperate? What d'you mean by that?"

"Archfiend Pam is dead. I've also checked Ripple's body. I know what she looks like, pretransformation, so there's no mistaking it."

Ripple was dead. What should she feel? What should she think? Though 7753 had anticipated this, her thoughts and feelings were all in disarray. She closed her eyes.

"Is Hana Gekokujou well?"

7753 hurriedly placed her hand on Mana's shoulder, figuring it'd be bad if Mana were to get emotional, toss the phone on the ground, and break it. But Mana instead breathed a deep sigh. "Pukin killed Hana." Even standing beside her, listening, 7753 could tell that Mana was doing her utmost to restrain her tone of voice.

Frederica's tone lowered slightly as well. "We've also suffered severe losses. The assassin—the rainbow user of the middle school group—killed Tot Pop, and Archfiend Pam killed Sonia Bean. Pukin is alive, but…she attacked me. She's like a cat who's been sprinkled with cold water. She's out of control."

That was some pretty incredible stuff to be saying so casually. The assassin was the rainbow user from the middle school group. Had she let that information slip to show off how useful she could be, or was she trying to confuse them with lies? Or maybe she didn't even see it as important information.

Without revealing any upset, Mana prompted her, "…So?"

"So would you cooperate with me? Both our parties came to this town with the goal of capturing the assassin. Being that our goals are the same, shouldn't we be able to cooperate? Personally speaking, I would have no complaints, as long as the individual in question faces proper judgment. I did intend to be the one to stand as witness to her injustice, but I shall compromise. If what needs be punished is punished through fair trial, that's all I ask."

"But…the antiestablishment faction got you out of prison, right? In other words, you're a hired hand. Can you decide something important like that on your own judgment?"

"Unfortunately, I am alone. In absence of command, the lone soldier must take the lead."

"You can get in contact with the outside, can't you? Using your magic."

"With regards to that—that's the reason I would request your cooperation. The truth is—though this is embarrassing to say—a magical girl named Funny Trick has stolen my crystal ball. If possible, I would hope that perhaps you might have Kuru-Kuru Hime tell her to return it."

7753's hand on Mana's shoulder shook. This scum had killed Kuru-Kuru Hime's father and was now brazenly asking a favor from her.

"I can use my magic to have all of you escape the city, but I'll need my crystal ball back no matter what it takes. So I request your aid."

Mana told Frederica, "We'll discuss it," then hung up. She was far calmer than 7753.

"Can I hold on to your phone?" Holding the phone raised at a diagonal, Mana asked permission, and Kuru-Kuru Hime weakly nodded. 7753 realized her hand was still on Mana's shoulder and hurriedly pulled it away. Her hand, her legs, and her lungs were all tenser than they had to be. She exhaled the breath she'd been

holding in.

Mana put the phone in her bag, then took out a clear glass bottle. She turned it over and shook out the tablets inside into her palm, then tossed them into her mouth, crushing them with her teeth. 7753 was not going to ask what sort of medicine it was.

That was when the phone rang. Mana dropped the bottle, and 7753's hand shot out to catch it. Mana pulled the phone out of her bag again, looked at the display, and narrowed her eyes. 7753 peeked in from the side. Displayed on the screen was an unregistered cell number different from the one that had just called. Mana stared at the phone as one whole ring passed by before accepting the call.

"…Hello?"

"Is this Kuru-Kuru Hime? This is Weddin and Funny Trick. We went back through a friend of a friend of a friend and somehow managed to get your number, Miss Himeno. Though we should have figured that out a little earlier. So what's happened with you? Are you safe? Tepsekemei was with us, but she went out to scout and hasn't come back. But Tepsekemei being who she is, I don't think we have to worry, although… Hello? Can you hear me?"

Mana handed the phone to Kuru-Kuru Hime.

☆ Pukin (Time remaining: five hours, forty minutes)

Time calmed her anger. Or rather, to be more precise, hunger, brought about by the passage of time, quieted Pukin's anger and brought her appetite back. Being angry made her hungry, and hunger settled her anger.

So she headed out to a small shop near the apartment building to nab some ready-made food: stuffed bread, chocolate candy, jerky, Chinese buns, fried chicken, and fries. When the rude staff tried to call her to task for it, she cut them down with a single slice, then returned to the apartment building to indulge in her meal. Eating alone was quite wearisome and made her feel Sonia's loss most keenly. And since Pukin had used her magic again, Weddin had escaped, too. Tot Pop was dead, and Frederica had run off. Pukin was the only one left.

She sucked on the chicken bones, snapped them apart with her teeth, and sucked out the marrow. She hardly even chewed the

chocolate or the pastries, instead shoving them down her throat like drinks. It gave her energy. She needed energy in order to get angry. And she would need more energy after that, too, in order to do anything.

Packages and crumbs scattered all about, she took a break. She leaned against the sofa and rubbed her nose, looking at her face in a hand mirror. Her nose was beautiful again. Magical girls' bodies had powerful recovery abilities. Bones would heal cleanly, even if they weren't set. Wounds that caused a fatal amount of blood loss to a normal human would be repaired with food and rest. And stronger magical girls like Pukin had particularly potent healing abilities, with a very short amount of time needed for self-recovery. So quite conveniently, before you knew it, not only your physical injuries but even the damage to your costume would be repaired.

The fracture caused by Archfiend Pam's head-butt was gone, and she'd stopped bleeding, but the wound in her stomach from the rainbow had yet to heal entirely. Pukin still didn't have enough energy to fix it yet.

Pukin more or less avoided thinking. However, when she was alone like this, she was forced into it. Before moving into action, she considered how she would express her anger.

Frederica was one of her attendants. Her laziness was unforgivable, and she had to be punished, but dealing with attendants wasn't a high priority.

Archfiend Pam was the most unforgivable of all her enemies. She'd killed Sonia and caused Pukin fear, leading her to that unsightly flight. Pukin had to dispel this humiliation quickly. But Pam had already been killed. Toying with her corpse was a fine idea but quite a bit lower on the list of priorities.

There were the more trifling characters, with Weddin on the top of the list. She deserved certain death for so insolently defying Pukin. Hunting down just one single rabbit wouldn't satisfy Pukin. But trifles were trifles. She could put them off until later.

That left the fairy, Toko, and the rainbow magical girl. Those two were Pukin's top priorities. She'd been wounded too badly to continue fighting them and judged in that moment that it was best to make a temporary retreat. She was confident in her decision. But even so, the humiliation of having fled enraged Pukin.

She got up off the sofa, twisted the sink faucet, and put her mouth straight under it to drink. The nutrients she'd absorbed

through her stomach and intestines made their way around her body, blood pumping hard to circulate it. She pulled her lips away from the faucet to run water over her hair instead, and once she'd had enough, she shook her head, shaking the water off. She saw herself reflected in the mirror that hung at the kitchen entrance. Satisfied by the beauty and nobility communicated in her reflection, she stuck her waterfowl feather in her hair.

She'd replenished her energy, and she'd also settled on which enemy she should prioritize hunting. Once the barrier was undone, she would make contact with the antiestablishment faction or something to that effect, and until then, she could just do as she pleased.

Pukin loved fairies; they were the best subjects for torture. They were so tiny, you had to be so very careful that they not die from blood loss when pulling out their nails, peeling off their skin, and cutting open their stomachs. A fairy's reaction once she realized what horrible, irreversible things were happening to her was always more interesting than that of humans or magical girls. The stark difference between their regular expressions and their faces when twisted in pain were so far and above anything either humans or magical girls would do.

There was more variety in mascots these days, and Pukin had heard some of them didn't even have physical forms anymore. It was difficult for her to understand why they would create something so boring. Simple and classic familiars like Toko were best.

In Pukin's day, she had even paid to participate in the torture of fairies, to torment them, slice them up, and dissect them. In order to keep them alive when hurting them, it had been necessary for Pukin to study the biology and anatomy of fairies in earnest, to become familiar with them as a scholar, and so Pukin had become more knowledgeable about fairies than anyone.

Fairies were filled with energy. They were the ultimate medicine of healing, a tonic, and a pain killer. A fairy would heal Pukin's wounds completely and would grant her greater power than what she had currently. In order to heal her wounds, in order to vent her anger, Pukin needed Toko.

☆ **Rain Pow (Time remaining: five hours, fifteen minutes)**

She'd originally returned to the apartment building to gather information.

Rain Pow had eliminated the enemy she'd known would be the greatest threat and had shattered the enemy's fighting line. Doing this had made the town much less dangerous for her. But since now even Tepsekemei had found out that Toko was a crook, her plan to meet up with Weddin and the others to shore up her safety even further had failed. So she'd gather intel instead. They didn't know from where or via what route Toko's misdeeds had been exposed. It was also possible there was a network of information exchange going on in this city which Rain Pow had been excluded from.

As they sought to collect information, they discussed a plan to stay in hiding until the barrier's time limit was up—or rather, Toko and Rain Pow discussed that, keeping an eye out for enemies as they returned to the apartment building.

When the three of them searched inside the apartment, Postarie discovered a smartphone. Rain Pow snatched the phone away from her. Postarie seemed nervous and uneasy, but she muttered in a somehow accusatory manner, "Should we be looking through other people's phones like that…?"

"It's fine. Now's not the time to be worrying about manners. So whose is it, huh…? Shibahara? She's got a message."

"What kind of message? Show me, show me!"

"It's nothing. It's from her parents, saying to call them… Oh. So that's it."

"What is it, Rain Pow?"

"We can't use our magical phones. But it's not like we can't use normal phones." She undid her transformation, returning to Kaori Ninotsugi to stick her hand in her coat pocket and pull out her phone. There was a message on her phone, too, but not from family. Her sister wouldn't do something so ill-advised as to attempt to restrict her behavior—not anymore.

"It's some kinda weird e-mail." The sender's name was listed as anonymous. It was blatantly suspicious. The message contained no attachments. The subject line said Urgent Business.

"Spam?"

"It looks like it, but I don't really know… Might as well just take a look." She opened the e-mail and immediately knew who it was from.

I contacted your magical phone but got no response, so I'll e-mail this phone, too, meow. I also heard about how you got rid of Archfiend Pam, meow. Good job, meow. I'll give you a nice pet for that, meow. And a special bonus for it, meow. However, this doesn't mean the problem is gone, meow. I hear a radical faction within the Department of Diplomacy is saying the two people Pythie Frederica broke out of jail—the fencer, Pukin, and the patchwork girl, Sonia—should be terminated by whatever means necessary, meow. I'm also hearing rumors they might use weapons of mass destruction to get rid of the escaped prisoners, meow. I'll promise you a special bonus to deal with that, just like with Archfiend Pam, meow. I look forward to seeing good results, meow.

With all those meows, and given what the message was about and that they knew Kaori's e-mail, it could be none other than her employer.

"A bonus! That sounds wonderful!"

"As usual, you love it when things work to your advantage, huh, Toko?"

"Sonia's been dealt with, so that means Pukin's the only one left. 'Cause of what they said about the radical faction and stuff, I think it might be best to make sure we get rid of her."

"You just want that bonus, Toko."

"Tee-hee."

"Don't *tee-hee* me! Ugh, honestly."

So they were forced to change their plans to hide until the barrier was undone. Rain Pow would eliminate Pukin. If there were any other powers who would further interfere with this situation, it was best to erase the reason for their interference.

Postarie was wringing her hands in worry. Now that it had come to this, she'd have to stick with Rain Pow until the end. Rain Pow smacked Postarie on the back. "Don't worry, Tsuko. When the time comes, I'll protect you," she encouraged her. She wasn't lying. She did mean to keep her safe. Postarie was a useful pawn and her hostage for whenever she needed it.

☆ Weddin (Time remaining: four hours, forty-five minutes)

Now that Tepsekemei was back and Kuru-Kuru Hime and the two

inspection team girls were there, with six magical girls packed into the tiny observatory, it felt cramped.

Kuru-Kuru Hime was so relieved to see her students again, she burst into tears. Funny Trick was surprised to see a teacher crying, but since Weddin knew part of the reason for her tears, she furrowed her brows heavily.

Frederica's party were, without a doubt, real villains, bad enough to make even calculated and selfish Weddin learn righteous indignation. And now it was less about righteous indignation and had guilt mixed in there, too. Even if she had been under Pukin's control, Weddin had been with them when they'd gone out to Miss Nozomi Himeno's house. Just remembering it made her want to vomit.

She didn't know what sort of people the inspection team were. But if they were against Frederica's group, then surely, they had to be better people. From the way Bunny Ears had seemed to have a silly side to her, and the ninja had been exceptionally skilled but had avoided killing and nailed Weddin to the roof instead, Weddin could surmise they operated within a comprehensible set of rules. So she should be able to work with them, unlike with Frederica's party, who had been incomprehensible and without rules.

The two girls from the inspection team introduced themselves as 7753, who wore a boys' school uniform, and Mana, who wore a pointed hat. Mana was more like a witch, and the elements like the goggles made 7753 more like an action heroine. Both of them were far from the archetypal magical girls of Weddin's imagination. 7753 was slightly absentminded, and Mana, who popped a pill from a bottle she had about once every five minutes and chewed it up, didn't seem quite entirely trustworthy, either—they both seemed fishy. But still, they had to be better than Frederica and Pukin.

The inspection team's explanation of events backed up what Frederica's party had talked about before: that they'd come to town in order to capture an assassin who had been going around killing people affiliated with the Magical Kingdom and that the assassin was Toko's partner.

They all shared the information they had.

"Our friend Captain Grace was killed by Sonia Bean." Weddin regretted saying it as soon as the words left her mouth. She could have at least phrased things a bit more delicately. Kuru-Kuru Hime looked at her with wide eyes. Her tears hadn't even dried. She

hadn't yet known Captain Grace was dead.

Funny Trick must have wanted to help, as she followed up after Weddin—even though Grace's death had to be a shock for her, too. "Um, the assassin is the magical girl named Rain Pow… Or so I hear. Tepsekemei here said Rain Pow cut her in half."

"Postarie made Mei's lamp fly."

"And the one named Postarie is an assassin, too… Is that right?"

"I don't know if they were in cahoots from the beginning or if Postarie is being threatened, but right now it seems clear that the two of them are working together. Rain Pow creates rainbow bridges, and Postarie uses her magic to make wings grow on things and send them back to their owners."

"Oh, so she's the one who made the van fly at us…"

"Yeah, that's right…"

"Let's be ready so we can dodge any desks or lockers that may come flying at us."

"Mei's lamp is pretty."

Mana spoke next. "There are rumors in the town of cosplay murderers—probably because of Pukin's group going nuts. There've been deaths all over the place, and apparently there aren't enough police cars, the hospital is full of wounded, and emergency services have been late responding."

"So if people see us in these outfits, we'll be instantly reported?"

"Come to think of it, Frederica contacted us, too. She said Pukin's dumped her and she's on her own. She also said if we return her crystal ball, she'd like to cooperate with us… Do any of you have it?"

"Oh, yes. I have it. I stole it when I escaped."

"So? Do we cooperate with her?" Mana asked them all, and Funny Trick and Kuru-Kuru Hime hung their heads.

"…I would rather not, if possible."

"Me neither…"

Weddin was no different. She didn't want to see Frederica ever again. She didn't want to call her an ally—not even temporarily. "I don't want to, either. Possible benefits aside, I never want to see her face again."

"Mei is fine either way."

"And besides, returning her crystal ball is quite out of the

question. That would more or less be like giving her hostages, wouldn't it?"

"She also said she could let us out of the barrier if she had her crystal ball. What about that?"

"We don't need to borrow Frederica's powers for that. We've already confirmed that we can use Funny Trick's magic to get out of the barrier. Funny Trick won't be able to get herself out, so we can't all escape, but… Couldn't we get outside and notify someone to have them help us or something?"

"So then for the time being, we can get out of the city to seek help, huh…? Either way, it would be best for civilians to be somewhere safe. We've lost most of our combat personnel. We can hardly do anything, and we can't protect you. We need to get some firepower and not fuss over how long it is until the barrier runs out. Though with Archfiend Pam dead, I think getting backup will be pretty hard…"

Weddin wondered who she meant by civilians and then realized it was themselves. She heaved a sigh. It had only been a day since she'd become a magical girl, and she'd already forgotten she was a civilian.

☆ **Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: four hours, nineteen minutes)**

She stared at her phone, fiddled with it, and spun it around, but no matter how she waited, no calls came.

She'd been aware they would see her request for her crystal ball's return as a threat to their safety. Her idea had been to present that most difficult request first thing to make them think about it and then start negotiation from that point, but it had failed, likely because they hated Frederica more than she'd anticipated.

Frederica had never imagined she would be popular, but as things stood now, she might be more despised than even rats or cockroaches. Pukin had killed Kuru-Kuru Hime's father; Sonia Bean had killed Captain Grace; Pukin had mind-controlled Weddin; and Tot Pop had been the one in charge of the whole operation, but it seemed nobody was going to take that into consideration.

She was all on her own with no allies; everyone was an enemy.

What a thrilling situation. This is the sort of thing befitting the hero

of a story, isn't it?

Though hanging up a blue plastic sheet over the roof of this mixed-residential building and resting under it was less heroic and more pathetic. She was at an impasse. Should she make up with Pukin somehow or bow her head to the inspection team, saying, *"I don't need my crystal ball, so please let me be of help to you"*? Whichever she chose, without her crystal ball or combat support, there was a limit to what she could do on her own.

Just then, her cell phone vibrated. *Will I be able to negotiate with them, somehow?* she wondered, but when she looked at the display, she saw it was an unknown number calling. Was it a call for the phone's original owner? She was disappointed but chose to accept it just in case and picked up.

"Are you Pythie Frederica?" A high-pitched voice addressed her, and Frederica pressed her middle finger to her temple. It was either synthesized or altered via a voice changer. It wasn't unthinkable that it might be an electronic fairy-type mascot, either.

"Yes, this is Pythie Frederica. Who might this be?"

"An ally."

Who was it? How did they know this number? A mysterious voice that skipped all preamble to whisper that they were a friend. It was so suspicious and so the sort of thing Frederica loved.

"I'm about to give you some instructions on what you should do, where you should go, and how you should do it. However, I will lead you to do something illegal."

"…Are you Tot Pop's sponsor?"

"Maybe, maybe not."

If they were a patron of the revolutionary faction, then they would just order her around in a more straightforward manner. They had the right to do that. And what's more, Frederica didn't know just how they'd figured out this cell phone's number. She'd just stolen it from a passerby. How could they have possibly come to know about it?

This patron had to be the sort who was fond of the eccentric and the theatrical. Frederica could understand that. Frederica loved the eccentric and the theatrical, too. "Well, either way, I'm at the end of my rope. I don't have that many options."

"Are you ready, then? Hurry up."

“Please, don’t rush me so. I was just trembling in the joy of having finally found an ally.”

This person was trying to use her. Not only did she have no right to refuse, being that she was utterly cornered, she was gradually coming to feel it would be interesting to be manipulated by this person. “Must I obey you indefinitely?”

“I won’t say indefinitely. I just want your help for a little while.”

“Hmm.”

“Another thing. Those who refused will surely want to be your friend, too.”

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: three hours, eighteen minutes)

She thought her hairdo was coming undone, so she put her hand to her head and instead touched cloth. It felt different from her hat. Stuck in her hair were the remnants of a scarf—the scarf she’d borrowed from Ripple was already in tatters. She couldn’t give it back. 7753 wasn’t fully attentive as she listened to the others engage in serious discussion.

Having lost Hana, Mana seemed to have actually become calmer. She was no longer pressing for her own team to capture the criminal, with their reputation staked on it. She was leaning toward the idea of letting the middle schoolers go, since they were just victims here, and calling for support—even if that took more time and even if she wasn’t the one to make the arrest.

The middle school group, who had to have been just ordinary kids until the other day, were bravely discussing with one another.

There was the girl whose friend had been killed in front of her, and the Japanese teacher whose father had been killed. They’d been deceived by Toko, with a traitor in their midst. There was another girl there who’d been captured by the escaped prisoners and could have been killed at any time. Even though they could so understandably have been crushed just by their own circumstances, they were talking together, saying, how about we do this, how about we do that. They were discussing over it all, not just for their own sakes but for everyone.

Hana had been murdered, stabbed in the chest. Although it had been clear to 7753 even without looking through her goggles that

Hana had already reached her limit, she'd still tried to fight, right up until the moment she collapsed.

Archfiend Pam had helped Hana escape, and then she'd been killed. If she'd only ever had herself in mind, she wouldn't have considered Hana's safety, too. She'd acted in consideration of another person and had gotten killed.

7753 squeezed the scrap of scarf in her palm tightly. Ripple was dead, now, too.

7753 was alive. She'd been diligently obeying her boss's instructions in anything and everything. She was locking information she should be sharing in her heart, keeping silent, never telling anyone. Because that was what her boss had told her to do. Why was she obeying her boss? She was selling her soul for a paycheck. That was the nature of labor. She couldn't fight that.

7753 tightly clenched the tatters of Ripple's scarf.

Messages displayed in her goggles one after another.

Even the other departments are whispering about the Department of Diplomacy going off the rails.

Furthermore, there are rumors they've already arranged for the weapon of mass destruction and they mean to use it while the barrier is still up.

If Funny Trick says she'll help you escape, then do it.

Staying put won't accomplish anything.

You're Magical Girl Resources staff, not a fighter, an inspector, or an assassin.

Who would blame a noncombatant for running?

I'm about to go to an emergency meeting, so I won't be able to reply for a while.

At the meeting, I'll be ascertaining whether it's true they intend to use a weapon of mass destruction.

If it is, I'll do my best to stop it, but I can make no guarantees.

So then your top priority must be to escape.

Escaping via Funny Trick's magic. The Department of Diplomacy meant to use a weapon of mass destruction. So then what would happen to B City? They would leave nothing left. The Magical Kingdom would destroy the whole town in order to kill one assassin. They were sure to make it out to be a natural disaster and

use magic to alter memories and records of the event in order to make that the truth. That was what the Magical Kingdom did.

If 7753 were to say nothing, then nobody would have to know. Nobody would blame her.

From the observatory, she could see out over the town. This was only a part of B City, but even so, it was too much for 7753 to encompass in her field of vision. *It's a lot of people, for a rural area*, she thought. Were old men hanging their fishing lines down in the pond again, today? How was the catch? She'd wanted to try going to the beauty salon. Was the reason there were so many tangled back alleys here because it had once been a castle town? There were a lot of shops downtown with their shutters down. The pachinko parlor in front of the station was particularly large. There were streetlights left broken, asphalt left cracked, and guardrails left bent. She had nothing but bad memories here in this shabby, depressed, declined town, where everything was broken.

Her boss's order to flee couldn't be wrong. They no longer had anyone here who could fight. There was the mage, Mana, the Magical Girl Resources specialist, 7753, and the four newbies who had only just become magical girls. No matter how they fought, they weren't going to win. It was best to escape this town, to abandon it.

7753 squeezed the scrap of cloth hard and brought her fist to her forehead.

What should she do? She should stop thinking about these things and just do what she'd been told. If she were to oppose her boss, she would no longer be safely employed. She would never receive another paycheck, and she would be tossed out into the world with no magic, no nothing. If she were to continue obeying orders, she could remain in this easy position where nobody would blame her.

The cloth touched her forehead and fluttered in the wind.

When had her life become this? How could she consider staying silent for the sake of her next paycheck when so many people would be killed? This wasn't what magical girls were about. This wasn't about being an employee, either. This was about being rotten garbage.

Kotori Nanaya had admired Cutie Healer back in elementary school. She'd declared to everyone that she, too, would become a cute, strong-hearted magical girl of justice, just like Cutie Healer.

7753 took off her goggles.

"Everyone… There's something I haven't been telling you about." Steeling herself, she gripped the scarf. She couldn't go back to how she was. So then, at least, she wanted to be a magical girl who wouldn't be ashamed of Ripple, or Hana, or Archfiend Pam. "People are saying the Department of Diplomacy is running rampant now that they've lost Archfiend Pam, who was supposed to be their ultimate weapon. There are whispers that…if we can't catch the criminals before the barrier is undone, they might unleash a weapon of mass destruction on this town."

Everyone was looking at her. She was now past the point of no return. She looked back at them all.

Somewhere, a pheasant was calling. Before its long, long cry ceased, Mana slowly stood. "Our magical phones are broken. How did you find this information out?"

"I received the message from my boss, through my goggles."

"…What?"

"When I told you that information about Pukin's party, when I told you to be vigilant about Archfiend Pam, and when I suggested we work together, all of this was done on my boss's orders."

Mana lunged forward and grabbed 7753 by the collar.

Someone smothered a cry.

"You're a real piece of shit! Hana died trusting you, and it was all a waste!"

7753 gazed back at Mana, who still grasped her by her collar. This was the angriest 7753 had ever seen her. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want to hear apologies!"

Following Mana, the girl in the wedding dress stood. "Hold on, what do you mean? A weapon of mass destruction?"

"Their plan is to destroy the whole town and the assassin with it."

"Please, don't be absurd! Just what kind of nonsense are you getting at?! What on earth?! Just who do you think you are?!"

A look on her face like she was caught between crying and laughing, or maybe she really was crying, after all, Funny Trick muttered, "I don't get what this means," holding her head. Kuru-Kuru Hime was pale, stunned to silence.

Weddin yelled, "Isn't this supposed to be the Magical Kingdom?! Isn't it about dreams and fantasy?! How stupid are all of you?! How can you drag us all in, then blow it all up when it

doesn't work out?! The ones getting dragged into it wouldn't agree to any of that! We're magical girls, aren't we?! Magical girls! We're supposed to be kinder and cuter than anyone! All of you are scum! Pukin, and Frederica, and the Magical Kingdom, too! I should never have become a magical-girl fan! You're nothing but genuine trash!" Halfway through her speech, Weddin starting crying and shaking with sobs. Mana, who'd been so furious, bit her lip and looked down. 7753 squeezed the scrap of scarf harder.

Mana slowly released 7753's collar. "You're right. We're all trash. Me and all of you… I already figured the outside help were all working for the benefit of their own departments. If you want to play nasty politics, then go right ahead." Mana's words were self-deprecating and also resigned. She was saying that she had been an idiot herself for ever having trusted 7753. That hit a lot harder than being yelled at. "I'd thought you were oddly informed, but I didn't imagine you had a gadget like that."

"…I'm sorry."

"I told you not to apologize. I resent that you never said anything until now, but it wasn't as if your advice was disadvantageous. And it frankly did help us in some ways. So I'll say we're even."

"…Okay."

"But don't get in my way again. From here on out, it is *my* job. 7753, take the middle school crowd and get out of this town. I'll take out the bad guys."

7753 stared back at her as if asking, *"What are you talking about?"* Mana was looking straight at 7753, her eyes full of determination. She seriously intended to manage this somehow—even though there was no way she possibly could.

"There's no way you can do it!"

"We don't have any more time. Even if we were to call for backup now, we don't know if they'd make it before the barrier is undone. I'll ask Frederica to cooperate. Then I'll get everyone out, including Funny Trick. And then I'll lure Frederica in, and the two of us'll figure something out. I'll pull it off somehow, even if I have to die in the process."

☆ **Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: three hours, forty-five minutes)**

"All right. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready, but… What's the point of this?"

"You don't need to worry about that."

"There's a reason I've come all the way out here, isn't there?"

"As I said, you don't need to worry about that."

Frederica looked down on the world below from the roof of the business hotel. It was already past noon, so there wasn't as much foot traffic now as there was during peak hours. In comparison, there were somewhat more cars going by. It seemed they were doing construction in front of the station, like working on a gas pipe or something, as traffic was restricted to one lane with alternating flow, and it was making the street a little congested.

Frederica put her cell phone down on a corner of the roof. Considering the job she was about to do, it was best not to take it with her. It would be a bother if she were to break it by accident.

But anyway, just who on earth was it talking to her through this phone? They'd known the number of the cell phone Frederica had only just stolen and had also been quite aware Frederica was the one using it. They had to be using some kind of magic to do this, but Frederica couldn't think of anyone applicable.

As the one being used, she wanted to know who was using her and for what reasons, at least.

"Don't worry. I won't hurt you."

It was as if they were reading her mind, and it gave her the creeps, which was also a little fun. Frederica's shoulders shook with her chuckles. If she was going to be used regardless, it was best if it was done by someone like this.

"That's reassuring. I'm quite hopeful." Frederica ended the call, then ran down the wall of the building.

Maintaining speed, she bent the trajectory of her sprint at a right angle, then kicked a middle-sized truck waiting at the light to knock it on its side. She ripped the door off the compact car behind it and yanked out the driver from inside, tossing him aside. The driver of the taxi in front of the compact car that had also been waiting for the light tumbled out of his vehicle and ran away. Frederica got a good hold on the compact car and lifted it into the air, winding it up to slam it into the taxi. Its glass shattered into a million shards, scattering in every direction.

Frederica just attacked and destroyed every car that caught her

eye. She twisted bumpers, smashed windshields, and ripped off doors. Running, she kicked three vehicles in a row in their sides, knocking them over, and the fourth vehicle, a company truck, she sent tumbling over sideways into the entrance of a convenience store. She was particularly thorough about destroying an expensive foreign car with a fancy emblem on it.

Screams, yells, and the sounds of shattering glass flew every which way. Cars swerved, and people abandoned their vehicles to run, all of them fleeing Frederica as fast as possible.

Going on a monstrous rampage like this felt incredible. But she couldn't hang around long. If it were the police or the SDF or whatnot, then well, if they came, they came, but if something else were to arrive—

Oh, so that's it.

Causing a scene would bring magical girls coming to see what was going on. Then nearby dangerous magical girls might encounter one another. Understanding the reason she'd been made to go on a rampage, she was now aware of what a nasty character the one who'd given her that order was.

Joy in her heart, Frederica left the scene, knocking over three more cars right before she departed.

☆ Rain Pow (Time remaining: three hours, thirty minutes)

Rain Pow heard the ruckus, and by the time she'd rushed up to the top of a hotel there, the culprit was already gone, with only the results of their deeds laid out in the world below. Someone had clearly gone berserk. A number of cars had been knocked over and slammed, and some had even been tossed into stores. Only a magical girl could have done something like this.

But still, it wasn't the sort of thing the inspection team nor the middle school group would have pulled. The only plausible culprits here were Pukin or Frederica. This style of destruction was very emotional, like a wailing child's temper tantrum. Frederica was known to have a crafty and cunning personality, so such methods of venting or temper tantrums weren't like her.

Pukin, then?

A car burst into flames with a *whoosh*, likely ignited by some leaking gasoline.

“Postarie, you keep an eye on our rear. Toko, keep watch above us.”

According to her information, even a single hit from Pukin would spell game over. Even though Pukin had been injured after Rain Pow had killed Pam, persisting in pursuit of her would have been dangerous. Rain Pow went on the alert, sharpening her senses and readying herself to deal with an attack from any direction. This spectacle seemed to indicate that Pukin was furious. If that fury was directed at Rain Pow, then she absolutely couldn’t let her guard down.

She was back-to-back with Postarie, with Toko above their heads. Neither of the two could be trusted all that much in combat, but they could have some use as lookouts.

Rain Pow slowly leaned over the roof’s edge, gazing down. There was no sign of any people. So that meant they’d all run? It should take a bit longer for police or fire trucks to arrive. Since there had been so many magical girls running wild elsewhere, emergency services had just that much more work to do. They could request support from outside the city, but it wouldn’t come immediately… Just like with the Magical Kingdom—

Rain Pow leaped to the side, then turned around. There was a fencer-style magical girl behind Postarie, glaring murderous daggers at them. Postarie slumped to the ground. The force of Pukin’s malice was like being pierced through the heart. It was more than a freshly debuted newbie could handle.

Over her head, Toko fled in the opposite direction. She understood what she had to do.

Rain Pow turned her rainbows on Pukin and formed a wall of multiple rainbows on top of the building. Unlike Ripple, Pukin wasn’t going to throw homing projectiles at her. No matter how fast she was, she always attacked directly with her sword. It was worthwhile enough to just inhibit her movements.

The rainbows raced toward Pukin from every angle, and she dodged them, knocking them aside with the rapier in her right hand and the dagger in her left. When Rain Pow caught a glimpse of her mouth through the veil of her hair, flowing in the wind, she saw Pukin was grinning.

Rain Pow was ready. Though she was wary of Pukin’s smile, she never let up with her attacks. An assassin never made an ineffective strike.

Pukin turned aside one rainbow with sharp swordsmanship, slammed into another, kicked aside the rainbow that grew from below, then turned in midair to leap from the roof railing before vanishing. Unease rose in Rain Pow again, just like when she'd seen that smile, and something about this felt harsher. It was often wise to weigh feelings over thoughts. If there was a reason Pukin had caused a scene, could it be that she wanted to lure Rain Pow here?

Absolutely do not let your guard down. Never let your guard down. No matter what happens, don't let your guard down, she told herself, and she grabbed Postarie's collar to force her to her feet. Pukin was mainly a close-quarters fighter, and Rain Pow was fairly compatible with that. No matter how swift she was or how sharp her sword, Rain Pow could prevent her from getting close. But Pukin would be aware of that, too. So if she'd lured Rain Pow here well aware of that, then she may have arranged some kind of trap—for example, Frederica. She had yet to reveal herself, but it may be that she and Pukin were looking to corner her together. Pukin might well have set a bomb or something on the roof of the hotel to go off at just the right moment.

Rain Pow often taunted her enemies verbally. But she would never actually take them lightly.

Holding the trembling Postarie under her arm, Rain Pow leaped from the roof of the hotel over to the cram-school building, then dashed up a rainbow. She ran a micron-sized rainbow, thinner than a string, all around the area to alert her of any attacks. If the time came, she would give a signal to Postarie, toss out the welcome mat wrapped around her middle, and they would grab hold of that to escape. But she would prefer to finish Pukin off now rather than running, if possible. It wasn't just about the special bonus—it was best for both Pukin and Frederica to be gone.

Rain Pow focused all her senses on detecting attacks. Alert and ready to deal with anything, no matter from what direction, she heard Toko cry out from the sky above, and her concentration was broken. Looking up, she saw Toko being attacked by a black swarm. It was crows. They poked her with their beaks and scratched her with their claws, and Toko was wailing and trying to escape them. Rain Pow was about to drive them away with a rainbow but was unsure, worried she might hurt Toko instead. In that brief moment of hesitation, a figure leaped into the swarm of crows, grabbed Toko, and landed on the edge of the building.

“When fighting an opponent who uses projectiles, you keep the fairy under your clothing. When your opponent lacks projectiles or means to fly, you let the fairy escape into the air. It’s a logical strategy, but that only makes it simple to read.”

Toko in her grasp, Pukin looked down at Rain Pow. With the sun at her back, Rain Pow couldn’t see the look on her face, but from the tone of her voice, Rain Pow could tell she was smiling. She spoke a little on the slow side, perhaps to make it easier for Rain Pow to understand her English. “To control a murder of crows, one need only target the dominant bird. Simple, isn’t it?”

Rain Pow mentally clicked her tongue but didn’t let that show on her face or in her voice, sneering back at Pukin instead. It was harder than she’d thought to mentally translate into English and then insult her back.

Postarie, held under her arm, was trembling. But her trembling conversely made Rain Pow calmer.

“What’s the point of taking someone like *her* captive? If the Villainous and Vile Pukin the Mighty is gonna take a hostage, I think you could make better choices. Just saying.”

“Hey! Rain Pow! After all I’ve done for you!”

“Have you really done all that? Honestly, I’ve been thinking you were kinda a pain in the ass.”

“Stop it! Don’t pull anything! I don’t wanna die yet! Do what Pukin says!”

“No way. C’mon, Toko. At least yell something like, ‘Don’t mind me—kill her!’ Eh?”

Rain Pow had no intention of actually abandoning Toko. Toko understood that, and she was going along with her act.

Pukin flourished the sword in her right hand, pointing it at Toko’s stomach as she held the fairy in her left. She smiled gleefully. “My, my! Isn’t this grand! We have seen so many giving in to torture and selling out their comrades that it’s simply tiresome, but *this* is the first we’ve ever been witness to such lovely friendship!” Pukin held her stomach and laughed as if this were sincerely hilarious to her. This sort of real laughter also meant she was letting her guard down just that much.

Toko argued with Rain Pow loudly, and then, mouth open wide, she bit down onto Pukin’s gloved fingertip. Pukin let out a muffled cry and jerked to cover her left hand, and Toko used the moment when her grip loosened and slipped out from between her

fingers, flying for Rain Pow at full speed. Pukin's sword stabbed toward the fairy, but either the pain or the lack of preparedness made her move too slowly.

Rain Pow sent out a rainbow to block the sword and cover Toko, then followed up with another one to attack. Pukin rolled to a position on the hotel roof that was out of sight from Rain Pow's position. If she was going to finish off Pukin, now was the time.

Rain Pow dashed onto a rainbow, meeting Toko halfway, and tucked the fairy into her shirt.

"Man, getting attacked by crows sounds like something out of a horror game."

"I never wanna go through *that* ever again."

With Toko in her clothing and Postarie held under her arm, Rain Pow dashed along the rainbow back to the roof of the hotel. Pukin was standing on the railing on the opposite side.

Was she planning to jump down again? Rain Pow wouldn't let her escape a second time.

She sent a rainbow through the air to hold Pukin down and was about to generate more when she felt a prick of pain at her chest and froze. It was a very mild pain, as if she'd been pricked with the tip of a needle.

She looked down at her chest where Toko should have been. But a hand was there instead.

A hand?

It wasn't someone reaching out to her with their hand. There was just a disembodied left hand at her chest. It hadn't been cut off, it wasn't bleeding, and it wasn't cold. It had heat; it was warm—in fact, it was trying to move, so she grabbed it and struck it.

Frederica, huh?

This was Frederica's magic—Toko had told her about it. Without a moment's hesitation, Rain Pow shot out a rainbow to slice the hand in two. A spray of blood flew from it, and it spasmed. Rain Pow crushed it under her heel. Toko had told her that when Frederica put her hand into her crystal ball, she could meddle with the location reflected within the crystal ball. So in other words, did that mean she'd kidnapped Toko using that method? Rain Pow hadn't noticed Frederica at all, and by the time she did, Toko had already been gone, and the left hand was there.

She turned to Postarie to warn her to be careful, then guarded herself and sent out her rainbows. Postarie wasn't there. Standing

there was not Postarie but Pukin, sword drawn. Rain Pow made a rainbow wall and sent rainbows toward her from all directions. But even though Rain Pow was completely within her stabbing range, for some reason, Pukin just stood there, neither evading nor attacking, as all the rainbows hit her, slicing her to pieces, and she fell to the ground.

Bafflement visited her before gladness or elation. Pukin had taken Rain Pow from behind. She could have killed her at any time, if she'd wanted to, right? Why hadn't she attacked? Why had she just stood there until Rain Pow noticed her? And after she'd been discovered, why hadn't she tried to move? Why had she just allowed herself to be killed?

And where had Postarie gone? Rain Pow focused her nerves on the movements around her. She placed her hands on the roof. She sensed vibration, humidity, warmth, and the movements of the air —everything. Even if Frederica had kidnapped Toko, Postarie wouldn't go anywhere on her own. If Pukin had been the one up to something here, that wouldn't have caused her death. Was someone besides Pukin or Frederica attacking her?

"Perhaps you should have been more cautious about a hostage who escaped on her own." Pukin's voice reached her ears, and Rain Pow turned around, but Pukin was still lying there, not even twitching. She'd been hacked up by rainbows and continued to bleed out.

"By the time we captured your precious fairy, we had already wounded her and made her our own. When she argued with you loudly and bit our finger to escape, all that was done under our command. We sent a spy to your breast to land a strike under your tight guard. We broke the tiniest piece off the tip of our sword and gave it to Toko to hold. Under my order, the fairy pricked your chest, and next, you were magicked, your perception distorted."

I've been stabbed? By Toko? What's she talking about?

"We mean to say that our magic has caused your perception to err. Look properly at what you've done, what has just come to pass, from the correct perspective."

She heard a sound like a *snap* in her ears, and her vision twisted, then cleared. Pukin, torn to shreds, became Tatsuko Sakaki. The volume of blood and position of wounds were identical. Frederica's hand was now Toko, sliced clean in two.

Very calmly, Rain Pow thought, *Oh, so that was how I was seeing*

it wrong. She reassessed things, and she was puzzled at herself for being so strangely composed. When she wiped her cheek with her finger, she found there was blood on it.

"We've cast it again on you. Now, you are our vassal."

I see, she thought, accepting it. That explained why she could be so calm. Pukin was standing close by, leaning against the iron fence. Pukin's magic had also prevented her awareness of her presence.

Pukin broke into a cheery smile and brushed back her bangs. "Now then, for our first order—slice those two up in as brutal a manner as possible."

Rain Pow shot out her rainbows. She didn't even consider opposing Pukin's command. Of course she would obey. Calmly, she sent forth her rainbows, pointing their sharp tips at Tatsuko's and Toko's corpses.

Rain Pow thought about the two of them. Heart cold and crisp, she properly understood now exactly how she'd felt about them.

Without Toko, she would probably have continued to be her sister's slave. The selfish, villainous, and egotistical fairy had joyfully told her, "With your talent, we can take on the world!" It was because of Toko she'd made it this far. She could never thank her enough. Toko had been the first person in her life she could smile and feel happy with.

And as Postarie had saved Rain Pow, Rain Pow had also been unable to kill Postarie. She should have killed her early on, before even attacking Archfiend Pam, since she couldn't know what Postarie might do. But Rain Pow just hadn't been able to do it, creating the excuse for herself that she was making her a hostage, and had kept her alive. She just hadn't been able to bring herself to think about killing Postarie.

But now it's all over.

Rain Pow sliced up the two corpses with her rainbows, chopping them up finely to Pukin's satisfaction.

Pukin smiled.

"Don't you worry. Once matters have settled, we'll return your mind to normal. You'll hold the memory of how you murdered your friends in your heart as we kill you. That shall be the first forgiveness you'll ever receive, drudge."

CHAPTER 12
THE MAGICAL GIRL WITHIN YOU

☆ **Weddin (Time remaining: three hours, forty minutes)**

"Even if it's impossible, I just have to do it."

7753 took Mana's hand. "I'll stay, too."

"I thought I told you not to get in my way again." Mana immediately shook her off.

"I won't get in the way."

"You'll get in the way just by being here." Mana was serious. She was entirely sincere in her intention to finish this all by herself.

Weddin's thoughts and feelings swirled around in an endless vortex. Just a moment ago, she'd been wailing pathetically, blaming the Magical Kingdom, 7753, and Mana.

But even venting all her rage had not cleared the hesitation she still felt. And Weddin knew all of it would just come back to her. If a magical girl wasn't something worth aspiring to, then she had to make herself the model of one—because she was a magical girl, too.

"So then… Please, let us help, at least." The words escaped Weddin's mouth. She was being entirely sincere, but even so, saying it out loud made her break into a cold sweat.

Mana shook her head. "You're all newbies with almost zero experience. No matter how many of you we scrape together, you'll just be a burden."

"Don't belittle me."

"I'm not belittling you. I'm only giving you the truth."

The town would be destroyed. The ten-odd years of her life would all disappear.

The classmates who'd helped her with school, the homeroom teacher who'd held Mine in high esteem, the kids who had called

her a suck-up behind her back, the school—all of it would be gone. The old lady in the neighborhood who had given her the same compliment ever since preschool: “It’s so nice how you always say hello so cheerfully”; the kids’ park with the monkey bars where she’d once hit her head when she was little and had wailed on about it; the library with the cubicles she’d used when she wanted to be alone; her house. It would all be gone.

Knowing what should be done, what she was capable of, and running anyway, was not the act of a leader and not something the magical girls Mine had always admired would do. Even now that she was in middle school, she’d never stopped watching anime—because of the magical girls. And there were still magical girls, now—right here.

Weddin turned around.

Funny Trick’s shoulders were shaking with sobs. Kuru-Kuru Hime merely stood there, struck dumb. Weddin could give them orders. She could tell them, *“Follow me! Let’s fight together! We magical girls are the only ones who can save this town!”* But that was the same as telling them to die with her, wasn’t it? That was just like telling them to follow her to hell.

Death. Dying. Killing. Being killed.

Weddin lifted her head, and her eyes connected with Tepsekemei’s. Tepsekemei was the only one there who was expressionless, as she always was, arms and legs folded as she floated in the air. “Weddin.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“No orders yet?”

They were all looking at her, listening for what she would say. She pressed her hand against her chest. It hurt. She wanted to tear it out.

What should a leader do? She didn’t want to die. She was scared. She didn’t want the town to be destroyed, and she really didn’t want to lose the people and things she cared about. *I’m scared. Help.*

Emotions, both strong and weak, rose within her, then disappeared. She felt as if something were pressing the back of her throat. What did she have to do to be released from this pain? She opened her mouth. “First, cool your heads, please. Not physically but mentally. If we lose our calm, we won’t be able to come up with any good ideas. And then please decide for yourselves—I won’t give

you any orders." She looked at Kuru-Kuru Hime, Funny Trick, and Tepsekemei in turn. "I've—made up my mind. No matter how you may oppose it, Mana, I will stay here and fight."

☆ Funny Trick (Time remaining: three hours, thirty-two minutes)

Kayo was all alone, crying in impenetrable darkness. Nobody would save her. Nobody would call out to her. She was sad and hurting and didn't want to do anything. If she just plugged her ears and closed her eyes and cried, it had to all pass, like a storm. That talk about the town disappearing was a lie.

She didn't want to hear anything. She didn't want to see anything. She'd never even wanted to be a magical girl in the first place. The others had celebrated it, and she'd just been dragged into it. She could never believe in magical girls. They shouldn't exist. That talk about a weapon of mass destruction was a pack of lies.

As she rejected everything, held her head in her hands, and trembled, inside her, Umi Shibahara was yelling.

"How stupid are you? There's no time to hesitate."

Kayo grew angry at Umi's brash remark. She argued back.

"You always *say stuff like that, Umi. But things are actually horrible right now."*

"So what if it's horrible?"

"You're reckless!"

"There's no such thing as reckless when you're a magical girl—only excitement!"

"Excitement?" Honestly, this isn't some…"

"Listen, don't go acting like just 'cause you found a good moment to escape means that was enough, okay? Just don't."

"Umi…"

"Don't you wanna beat me? If you beat someone I couldn't, that means you beat me."

Kayo, who had always walked behind Umi. Beating Umi.

"But…"

"No buts! Pull yourself together!" She spoke bluntly, giving Funny Trick a good kick in the rear.

When Funny Trick opened her eyes, she saw Weddin there.

Still holding her head, Funny Trick muttered, "I want to fight,

too."

She got the feeling that somewhere, someone was grumbling, *"You could try to act a little more badass about it."*

☆ Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: three hours, thirty-two minutes)

She no longer wanted to think about anything. Problems just kept bubbling up one after another, and before one was solved, the next one appeared. Her pride as a teacher or whatever was long gone. If nobody could fix things, there was no way a teacher could fix things, either.

Her father was gone. She had no one. The home she could return to would soon be destroyed. All their homes would be: the neighbor who struggled with a baby that cried so much at night; the house across the street where that husband lived, the one who'd been looking for a job since the factory where he'd worked had closed; and Nozomi's own house, now without her father.

There would be no struggling. She would just wait until it had passed. As a teacher, she'd failed to take care of her students; as a daughter, she hadn't been able to take care of her father; and as a magical girl, she hadn't managed to take care of the town. She hadn't been able to do anything. And she wouldn't be able to do anything, either. There was no longer any point.

Did she have to do something? Kuru-Kuru Hime, not anyone else. What for? She had no family anymore. She'd lost the desire to be a teacher. And no way did she want to be a magical girl.

For some reason, she recalled her father—that time when she had gone to pick him up at the station, an umbrella in hand, she'd been able to find him so quickly in the crowd. His face wasn't the sort that stood out, and he wore only the sort of ordinary suit you saw on any office worker, but she'd found him quickly, like, *"Oh, he's over there."* It was then that Nozomi realized she'd gotten her baby face from him. She'd giggled over this old man with a childlike face, and her father had given her a baffled look.

Nozomi never made barley tea, but the barley tea in the fridge never ran out. Whenever there wasn't much left, her father would put a pack of it into the kettle and boil some. It wasn't as if he'd been asked to do it. He just knew she liked it, so he'd always

refilled it for her.

He was gone now. He'd been murdered, taken from her. She had averted her eyes from the absurdity of it, repeating *"I'm helpless, I can't do anything"* as if chanting a mantra. Anger, like thick, oozing magma, threatened to well up from the pit of her stomach. Why did her father have to die? Why did the town have to be destroyed?

There was no longer anyone alive who would silently push her from behind. Kuru-Kuru Hime stood, with her own strength.

"I'll do it, too. Please let me do it."

☆ **Mana (Time remaining: three hours, thirty-two minutes)**

Weddin had made her announcement, Funny Trick agreed to it, and Kuru-Kuru Hime asked to be a part of it. Tepsekemei drifted around, the look on her face saying she would of course join in.

What should Mana do? She still felt she couldn't take regular people to do this. "…You can't. I can't use brand-new magical girls to fight with me."

7753 took Mana's hand one more time. This time, Mana didn't shake her off. "My boss said to me… 'You're Magical Girl Resources staff, not a fighter, or an inspector, or an assassin. You're not combat personnel, so come back,' she told me. But Magical Girl Resources can fight in a Magical Girl Resources way. Please give me one hour. In one hour, I can use my goggles to uncover all of everyone's potential."

"Potential?"

"From the moment you become a magical girl, you have a vague understanding of what your magic is. But ultimately, that's just a vague understanding. Normally, you learn the restrictions, limits, and applications of your magic through practice. None of the magical girls here have that experience."

"So…"

"I'll use my goggles to analyze their magic and make them all veteran-level."

Mana just couldn't shake off 7753's hand. Weddin, Kuru-Kuru Hime, Funny Trick, and Tepsekemei were not going to back down. Mana looked away from them all and kicked the dirt at her feet. "… I have a few items left. We'll split those."

Smoke bombs, her staff, and various other items rolled out of her bag.

Mana raised her head and pointed at Weddin. “You negotiate with Frederica. Use your magic…your promises, to manipulate her. Even trash like her is strong in a fight. Stronger than any of us.”

☆ Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: two hours, fifty-six minutes)

Those who refused will surely want to be your friend, too.

The suspicious voice who made a request to Frederica had told her that. Strangely, Frederica believed it. She thought it might be that person emphasizing their own usefulness. It was their own way of trying to appeal to Frederica, show her they would not only give her orders, but would also give her information.

Though the voice had been electronic, Frederica could surmise what intentions had lurked behind it. It hadn’t been trying to deceive Frederica, and neither had that been meant as a weak consolation.

Not long after Frederica fled the scene, the voice told her the results of her actions. Namely, the present situation: Pukin had won, Postarie and Toko had been killed, and Rain Pow was under Pukin’s control. This part was probably not an attempt to appeal to her but rather a reward for her cooperation. These results were within the scope of her own predictions, so she believed the voice was telling the truth.

The phone did not ring again.

Frederica waited patiently by the cell phone. She sat cross-legged in front of her plastic sheet, ignoring the passage of time, just focusing on waiting. The moment her cell phone vibrated, she took it in her hands.

It was from Kuru-Kuru Hime.

“Pythie Frederica speaking. Is this Kuru-Kuru Hime?”

“It’s Weddin.”

Oh-ho. “What might your business be?”

“Continuing our earlier conversation. You intend to cooperate, don’t you?”

“Well, well… Have the winds changed?”

“It’s no use making some bungling attempt to take advantage of

this. We've heard news that if we fail to capture the criminal before the barrier is undone, the Department of Diplomacy will send a weapon of mass destruction into the barrier. If that happens, you won't survive, either."

The Department of Diplomacy? They'd use a weapon of mass destruction?

Was it possible? It was clearly ridiculous. But Frederica got no sense from Weddin's voice that she was lying. Had there been some mistake, somewhere along the line? Were mistakes happening in the continuous tense, right that moment? Frederica had been cut off from outside information, so it was difficult for her to judge.

"I see… It seems we're in quite the pickle, hmm? Thank you very much for sharing this valuable information with me."

"I'm not particularly interested in thanks from you."

"Well then, I'll share something with you, too. Pukin and Rain Pow engaged in combat. Toko and Postarie were killed, and now it seems Rain Pow is Pukin's puppet."

She was met with silence on the other end. After about thirty seconds' pause, Weddin spoke again. "How do you know that?"

"Because I happened to be present. I ran before I was discovered, though." She was aware that was a suspicious statement to make. But Weddin would have no way to confirm her suspicions. "So there's no reason for me to refuse your proposal to cooperate, since I'd be helpless against Rain Pow and Pukin together. If you could tell me where you all are right now, then I'll immediately fly to you."

"We can't have you coming to us right away. First, you're going to make some promises to me, please."

"Promises?"

"We can't trust you. And we don't want to be stabbed in our backs once this battle is over, either. We're returning a powerful weapon to you, so we must have you do this much for us."

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: two hours, thirty minutes)

Pythie Frederica arrived.

Her style was star-spangled, with a star-decorated veil, a star choker, stars painted on her face, and star-patterned stockings, with her long, long hair flowing over her long skirt. When she pointed

that pleasant smile at you, it made one feel almost able to blindly trust her. But if she was the sort of person rumors said her to be, 7753 wouldn't take that smile at face value.

A volatile air wafted in together with Frederica.

7753 could tell even without looking through her goggles that this impression she had was neither vague nor unfounded. All at once, everyone—Funny Trick, who had been her prisoner; Kuru-Kuru Hime, whose father had been killed; Mana, who'd watched Hana die; Weddin, who had been mind-controlled; and Tepsekemei, who was just joining in on the bandwagon—glared at Frederica as she put her hand to the back of her head and made up an excuse: "All these things were done either by Pukin herself or on her orders… But I do regret my actions."

Regardless of whether or not Frederica seriously regretted everything, she was now no longer a fully harmful presence to their party. Among the promises she had made to Weddin, the three most pivotal ones were "don't do anything antagonistic toward the magical girls or mage," "don't lie," and "even after the barrier is undone, don't make the magical girls or mage the target of your magic."

The first one was obvious; the second was so that they wouldn't be deceived in the realm of something else Frederica hadn't promised to them; and the third was a preventative measure, so that after this incident was resolved, they would not be spied on.

They wanted to restrict her as much as possible, and Frederica wanted to avoid as many restrictions as possible, and so they discussed.

"If I'm forced to make such promises, it will affect my lifestyle even after this incident is over."

"And we have no desire to cooperate with someone who poses a threat to us."

Both parties came up with points of concession and compromise. They discussed "the order of priorities in emergency situations," "threats to one's right to life," "for averting present danger," and "a firm grasp on the system of orders," and came to an agreement. Further, separate from that, Frederica also made promises with Mana.

“I’d rather not have you arrest me once this is over, so for that I would request a plea bargain. Essentially, extrajudicial measures.”

“You mean to let you go?”

“Well, simply reducing my crimes somewhat would still mean the Magical Kingdom would try to arrest me. Rather, it would make both you and I happier if you were to pretend you’ve never seen me. Come now, I won’t do any more evil deeds. I simply don’t want to go back to prison.”

Frederica was bound to continue to be a crook. But at this point, they needed her help to prevent a weapon of mass destruction from being launched in this town. And since she’d promised not to lie, then she shouldn’t do anything to betray or deceive them.

“Hmph… Then first, we’ll have you search for Pukin. This is you we’re talking about. You’ll have some of her hair, of course?”

“If I could just have my crystal ball back, I could do that immediately. However, I ask that you please not make me put my hand into it. If I were to stick my fingers in there, I’m sure I would quite literally be caught red-handed.”

They discussed how they would integrate Frederica into their strategy, and then 7753 returned to her own task. She examined the new magical girls, who were not yet completely using their magic to the fullest. Looking at them through her goggles, she checked their magic’s effect range, use criteria, speed, and accuracy—every heading available to research how they might be used in practice.

7753 had seen more than just a couple hundred magical girls in her time. Making use of all her experience in Magical Girl Resources, she considered what these girls were capable of. 7753’s job had been to search out negative traits and report them. This required her to get an accurate grasp of the target. She hadn’t been writing out reports, lately, but it wasn’t as if she’d lost that experience.

☆ Pukin (Time remaining: one hour, twenty-five minutes)

Pukin bit into the ham, devouring it. *This is just like Sonia*, she thought, laughing at herself, but remembering Sonia made her chest ache. No matter how she ate and ate, it still wasn’t enough. Was it

that she lacked enough food? Or was it stimulation she was lacking? She'd just absorbed the ultimate nutrition, a fairy, so she should have no complaints regarding quality, at least. Taste and texture aside, fairies were more nutritious than just about anything.

"Bring us more. It's still not enough."

"Yes, ma'am." Rain Pow was obedient and easy to use. She obeyed anything, no matter what the order. Pukin had made her that way, but it was lacking in interest. She'd prioritized ease of use, so it made sense she would end up like this. Pukin could order her to do something interesting or say something interesting, but she doubted Rain Pow could entertain her. She would loyally attempt to carry out such orders, but it was sure to go poorly. Pukin considered summoning Frederica back, under the strict instruction to never slack off again, but she had no means with which to call her.

Both thinking about Sonia and thinking about Frederica felt unpleasant. She was just going on eating like this without any form of distraction because those she awaited weren't coming. If the inspection team, which meant to capture Rain Pow, were to come, that would be entertainment enough for Pukin. She couldn't understand why it was taking them so long to do their job.

Pukin had sliced up the walls, floor, ceiling, and furniture of the room in an attempt to vent her aggression. But despite how she let it out, there was still no target for her to attack. This led to her spinning her wheels fruitlessly, and the walls, floor, ceiling, and furniture were made sacrifices. It wasn't interesting.

It wasn't good that the inspection team was so incompetent. How dare they make Pukin wait this long? But if her opponents were incompetent, then she would have to accommodate that. Pukin was generous and tolerant. She treated not just her retainers but even her enemies with kindness.

When Rain Pow came back through the window with foodstuffs in her arms, Pukin ordered her, "Go outside and begin killing every human you encounter. Destroy buildings and vehicles, too—and not only that but set them on fire, too. Once there is rising smoke, they'll be forced to take notice."

"Yes, ma'am."

Before long, Pukin heard screams and sounds of destruction coming from outside. If she could hear the cries of children, the shrill sounds of women screaming, men yelling, and some begging

for their lives, too, that would be perfect. A lump of ham in one hand, Pukin stood and gazed out from the veranda as she bit into the meat.

"Swine. Their squeals are unexpectedly pleasant."

This made her dull meal a little more interesting. She should have ordered this earlier.

☆ Rain Pow (Time remaining: one hour, five minutes)

Pukin's orders were absolute. Rain Pow had no choice. She did as she was told. She let fly her rainbows at the elderly couple sitting side by side on the bench at the bus stop, fired them at the incoming cars, and used more to cut down road signs and traffic lights. She raced through the middle of the commercial district, using her rainbows on shop after shop, splattering red liquid on the show windows from the insides until you could no longer see within.

She kicked up clouds of dust as she raced along the road, spurts of blood following her, dyeing her path red.

Rain Pow lacked any powers of judgment—no *I wanna do this* or *I don't wanna do that*. And not only had she been ordered to kill and destroy, but to set fires, too.

She went into a miscellaneous goods store and fished around, but found no matches. She headed for a convenience store not too far away, and found an employee there, so she tried asking, "Where are the matches?" The employee just kept on screaming and didn't make to answer, so she cut them up, then recalled a shop for Buddhist articles might have matches.

Running along the road, she used her rainbows to destroy everything in sight. She had to do just as Pukin had ordered. Making use of her many rainbows, she could accomplish that easily. She sliced open a police car, cut down an officer, cut up a dump truck, and slashed the giant Buddha statue on the roof of the Buddhist goods store into three pieces. The Buddha statue collapsed with a shudder, and it crushed the roof of the building it fell onto.

Rain Pow just carried out the orders she'd been given.

She took an economical ten-pack of matches from the Buddhist goods store. With this, she would be able to set as many fires as she wanted. Surely, this would satisfy Pukin.

“What are you doing?” she heard suddenly from behind, and with a leap backward, she turned around, sending out rainbows. Those seven rainbows total all soared true, hitting the source of the voice, but even so, the target did not fall.

“You’re an enemy, after all.”

Tepsekemei gathered together the pieces of her shredded form and looked down at Rain Pow. If Tepsekemei was here, that meant the others had to be here, too. The names rose in her mind one after another: Kuru-Kuru Hime, Weddin, and Funny Trick.

☆ Weddin (Time remaining: fifty-eight minutes)

Weddin’s magic forced someone to keep the promises they’d made.

According to 7753’s analysis, she was unlimited in both her number of promises received and number of promises a single individual could make to her.

A contract could be overwritten. If contradicting promises were made to her, the newer promise would have stronger powers of compulsion.

She could compel a target to act but could not restrict their thoughts or feelings.

A contract could be made even without her meeting someone and speaking to them directly. This was also true for her communicating her desire to her target.

Also, the foundation of this ability was Weddin’s subjective view.

Reflected in Frederica’s crystal ball, Rain Pow’s expression was vacant as she engaged her destructive activities. She looked clearly as if she’d lost her mental equilibrium. It was clear she was being controlled by Pukin’s magic. You didn’t have to be Weddin, with her experience of having been under Pukin’s control, to be able to tell that.

The question was: Would Weddin’s magic work on someone who was under Pukin’s control? Rain Pow’s promise had been worded as “to obey the leader’s decisions.” Obviously, Rain Pow didn’t acknowledge Weddin as her leader at the moment, but 7753 had said that whether the magic worked depended on Weddin’s perception of Rain Pow. As long as Weddin believed that even if a person was brainwashed or had lost their memories or their

personality had fallen apart, she still held the right as their leader, then her magic would work.

"What incredible carnage," Frederica said cheerfully as she watched Tepsekemei in her crystal ball. No matter what a master of self-deception Frederica might be, as long as Weddin kept it together, Frederica would never be able to oppose her magic.

"She must be destroying things like that in order to show us where she is, to lure us to her."

"Quiet, please. You'll distract me."

Rain Pow and Tepsekemei were about twenty yards apart, engaging in an ongoing long-range fight. Tepsekemei's body had been sliced to ribbons by rainbow blades, while Tepsekemei's attacks were blocked by walls of rainbows. *I see, so that's how she uses them.* Rain Pow's attention was focused on Tepsekemei, who was fulfilling her role as decoy.

"All right, then do it, please."

"Yes, yes, understood." Frederica grabbed Weddin by the collar and shoved her face into the crystal ball.

That hurts, Weddin thought, and an instant later, she was somewhere else. Rain Pow and Tepsekemei were fighting right close by. Weddin leaped out from cover and yelled, "Stop, Rain Pow! You're not allowed to hurt anyone!"

Rain Pow turned around. Her expression was still vacant.

"I'm the leader! Rain Pow, don't use your magic! No kicking or hitting! Don't hurt any living things! Don't break things! No evil deeds! You're not allowed to do anything ba—"

A streak of light. By the time Weddin realized it was a rainbow, there was a yank on her collar and she was dragged back. Tepsekemei and Rain Pow both vanished, and there was Frederica beside her.

"How come it didn't work?!"

"It seems her ears are plugged. From the way she's moving, it seems she can't hear anything."

"Her ears are plugged… That's it?"

Their strategy—wherein Tepsekemei would play decoy, and while she had Rain Pow distracted, they'd take her by surprise with Frederica's magic—should have worked out. The sounds of destruction were gradually approaching. Weddin bit her lower lip hard.

☆ **Rain Pow (Time remaining: fifty-five minutes)**

She'd never let her guard down around Weddin's magic, not from the moment they'd first become allies. One promise to Weddin alone was bound to bring it all crashing down. But still, one of the group refusing a promise would have made her look suspicious. So she'd come up with a way she could hide her presence in the group while also resisting Weddin's magic. It was a very simple solution.

Tepsekemei dived toward Rain Pow with her mouth open. It looked like she was trying to say something, but Rain Pow couldn't hear her right now. When they'd started fighting, she'd filled her ears with rainbows to shut out any sound. Neither Weddin's orders nor Tepsekemei's yelling would reach her.

She'd figured out a way to deal with Tepsekemei.

Rain Pow raised a wall of rainbows to block her, then put up more rainbows, which she plated with even more. She kept shooting out rainbows, manifesting them, making layer upon layer, burying rainbows with more rainbows. If Tepsekemei had been calm, she would've realized Rain Pow's goal before she could accomplish it and would have managed it somehow. But she wasn't trying to avoid the attacks, now. She was trying so hard to fulfill her role as decoy, she was making no effort to avoid anything, just taking it all. Rain Pow surrounded Tepsekemei with rainbows, and in the end, she had a rainbow sphere the size of a basketball with Tepsekemei inside it. Even Tepsekemei, made of wind as she was, couldn't escape an airtight sphere. The multiple layers of rainbows were incredibly strong against brute force, and they were impossible to destroy unless you used some unique magic on it—which Tepsekemei would not have.

☆ **Pukin (Time remaining: fifty minutes)**

The sounds of screams and destruction gradually grew distant. Rain Pow must have been trying to further the commotion by keeping up the carnage as she moved. Her passion for the job was wonderful, but now that Pukin could no longer hear the background music, her dinner didn't taste quite so good anymore.

She heard the sound of something falling with a *clunk* from the kitchen.

“Sonia? Frederica? Rain Pow?”

There was no reply. Pukin drew her rapier, making her way to the kitchen with silent footsteps, then somersaulted in the air to avoid the score of ribbons breaking through the window to fly at her.

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s a good diversion! Not a bad strategy!”

The ribbons made to run outside, so she followed them, jumping out the window. She confirmed the enemy’s position. The ribbon magical girl was making to rush down the wall. There were no others. She could sense no one else around.

Had the ribbon girl come to confront Pukin all alone? She was running too fast for that. Then she raced down the wall and set off in the opposite direction from where Rain Pow had headed. Pukin gave chase but didn’t catch up.

Pukin’s legs were faster, but the ribbon girl could use her ribbons to grab buildings and street signs, tugging at them to swing through the air. She would also use them to make wheel-like shapes, landing on them to maintain her forward momentum. Though she surely could move fast enough to leave Pukin behind if she felt like it, she maintained a speed where she would neither escape nor be caught.

Does she intend to lure us somewhere? If so, then she is underestimating us. Pukin snorted.

There were few pedestrians on the street as they ran down it, leaping over a cluster of police cars and jetting along a raised path between rice fields to come out to a mountain trail. Was the ribbon girl simply choosing a place with fewer people, or had she set up a trap here? They arrived in a clearing in the forest about fifty-odd yards wide. There was a wooden arrow direction sign. Pukin couldn’t read the characters, so she didn’t know what it said.

To her right there was a pile of logs; to her left, three figures: a girl in goggles, a girl wearing a pointed hat, and a stage magician. There was nothing particularly unusual about the ground below. They weren’t trying to pull something with a pit or land mines. So then why had they lured her here?

The town’s outskirts… Oh, the barrier, eh?

So they meant to use the barrier to knock her out? It wasn’t a bad plan—if they could actually pull it off.

Whatever their plan is, we merely need to crush it.

The magical girl in the goggles yelled, “Please, be careful! She’s more powerful than I thought! The number of her strength hearts is unusually high, compared to when she fought Hana… How are there so many?!”

Fairies were the greatest nutrients. They brought out magical girls’ strength. If only they had tasted good, Pukin would have no complaints.

☆ Weddin (Time remaining: forty-eight minutes)

Weddin’s magic didn’t work, and now that Tepsekemei was locked up in that rainbow ball, basically every part of their strategy had fallen apart. The exhaust duct of the fried chicken shop kept on going, rattling like it was on the edge of breaking, and Frederica and Weddin, who were hiding under the sheet they’d put up there, fell silent, gazing into the crystal ball.

Rain Pow jumped off a building with the shrunken rainbow sphere in her arms. Leaving the ruined town behind her, she raced atop the buildings along the road. The scene in the crystal ball was reflected using Tepsekemei’s hair, so it changed as her position moved.

“Where is she going…?”

“If she’s taking the sphere with her, then that must mean she intends to do something with Tepsekemei inside it. For example… Ah yes. Even Tepsekemei wouldn’t go unscathed if Rain Pow were to shove her at the barrier or something, now, would she?”

“No…! So then, please, hurry and steal that sphere from her!”

“Yes, yes, roger that.”

Frederica plunged her left hand into the crystal ball, and it came out behind Rain Pow as she ran. Frederica’s hand stopped just behind Rain Pow’s back, but the moment she was about to touch the sphere, a rainbow arced toward her fingers. Frederica instantly yanked back her hand. Blood spurted from the back of her hand, dripping a red stain onto her cheek.

“An assassin’s intuition is a frightening thing. Even with her ears plugged, this is what you get. You’re at quite a disadvantage when your opponent expects you. With things like this, even if I try to make contact with her through my crystal ball, she’ll only shoot

me down."

Rain Pow paused a moment and looked around before seemingly judging there wouldn't be another attack, then dashed off again, hopping from building to building.

"Might I suggest something?" Frederica suggested with some reserve. Weddin couldn't stand her courteous attitude.

"Rain Pow isn't running at full speed. She's telling us to pursue her, as if saying, *'At this rate, Tepsekemei's gonna die, so if you don't like it, come at me.'"*

Within the crystal ball, Rain Pow was running, occasionally stopping to look at thin air. She knew she was being observed through the crystal ball. Was she challenging them?

"What shall we do? Give chase? Or shall we remain here?"

Without a word, Weddin dashed off.

Skirts fluttering, Frederica followed after her. "You're a little slow, Weddin. Couldn't you perhaps run a little faster?"

"This is the second time today someone's told me that." Weddin would give everything she had to do this right. She was not going to have regrets about this. She would save Tepsekemei *and* the town. As the leader, she had to do that much.

☆ Kuru-Kuru Hime (Time remaining: forty-five minutes)

7753 gave her the lecture.

Kuru-Kuru Hime could control a maximum of two hundred and sixty ribbons. She could adjust the width of each individual ribbon within a range of the smallest fraction of an inch to twenty inches. The speed of her ribbons' release was faster than Kuru-Kuru Hime could move her own body. 7753 had explained that she'd be able to block Pukin's attacks if she focused purely on defense alone.

And right that very moment, a fierce thrust came toward her from behind, and just as she had been told, she turned it aside with her ribbons as her feet hit the ground. Pukin landed after her, a foul expression on her face. Was she displeased her attack had been avoided by someone she'd assumed she could take down in one strike, or was she suspicious?

Pukin did a full windup and attacked again, and this time, Kuru-Kuru Hime formed a shield of her ribbons to block it. She couldn't manage to counter. Pukin moved frighteningly fast, and

Kuru-Kuru Hime had her hands full just keeping up. She signaled to the girls behind her by touching her middle and pointer fingers together and bending them twice. If it seemed she could lock Pukin down by force, then she would request their cooperation. If not, she was to tell them to stay back. She had signaled the latter instruction. If the other girls were to come help, she wouldn't be able to defend them. If Pukin were to attack them instead, they would get hit.

Kuru-Kuru Hime guarded with her shield, and even as Pukin strung her along with a series of feints, she managed to avoid the chain of attacks and leap backward. Pukin was stronger than 7753 had anticipated. Kuru-Kuru Hime caught, blocked, and turned aside her attacks, but Pukin was so strong, even blocking just one strike rattled her to her bones. This wasn't going to work. Her ribbons were fast enough, but her body couldn't keep up. Eventually, she would be outpushed.

Kuru-Kuru Hime undid some of her ribbons and sent them sliding all over her body. She thinned them out and pointed their tips, stabbing every part of her body with them.

A red droplet dripped from her hand. Blood flowed from some punctured vein. Her face was wet, too, and probably not with sweat. It was blood. Not because any of Pukin's hits had connected. She knew that if she were to get hit even once, that would be game over.

Pukin leaped from a tree, kicking off the one with the thickest trunk to go for Kuru-Kuru Hime's back. Kuru-Kuru Hime followed that movement. Now, instead of her muscles, she used her ribbons to move every part of her body. She smacked Pukin's thrust with a whip of ribbons and blocked with her ribbon shield. The bones of her legs made an unpleasant creaking noise. They had not yet broken.

Pain racked her body. But still, she could keep up with Pukin now. She had to resist the pain. She absolutely couldn't stop moving. She had to do this. There was no other magical girl in their group who could keep up with Pukin's speed.

They'd confirmed the position of the barrier beforehand. In a normal fight, leading her toward it would be an option. But they couldn't have a normal fight, not in this situation. All Kuru-Kuru Hime was doing was just barely managing to avoid being killed.

Her vision was tinged red. Had blood gotten in her eyes, or

were her eyes bleeding? Her body didn't have what it took to keep up with the speed. Pukin paused. Her eyebrows knit together as she stared at Kuru-Kuru Hime. Was she suspicious of her for wounding herself? She said something to Kuru-Kuru Hime in English, but it was too fast, and she couldn't understand it.

But even if she couldn't understand it, she was grateful Pukin had spoken. It gave her a break. She gathered the ribbons on her left arm into a cone shape and made it spin at high speed. She could repel Pukin's sword with this drill. She swung it at Pukin but then stumbled, and the drill bored into the ground.

Pukin let out a battle cry.

Kuru-Kuru Hime was on her knees with Pukin's sword thrusting toward her. Using all her strength, Kuru-Kuru Hime yanked at the ribbon she'd tied to a tree behind her beforehand, leaping back to it to avoid the sword. But her stance was still a mess. Pukin readied her rapier for another strike, and Kuru-Kuru Hime tripled the size of her shield, swinging it hard.

Kuru-Kuru Hime wasn't going to be the attacker here. She was the decoy and the assist.

Dug up by the drill and fanned by the giant shield, fine dirt billowed into the air.

☆ Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: forty-one minutes)

The moment Rain Pow noticed Frederica and Weddin, she stopped running, turned around, and headed in their direction. Frederica's prediction that she'd been running in order to make them follow had not been wrong.

Atop a building, the three magical girls clashed.

Frederica evaded several rainbows, then stuffed Weddin into her crystal ball, yanked her out again, and tossed her in one more time—all to save her from the rainbows. Weddin's presence was preventing Frederica from fighting.

With Weddin in her arms, Frederica leaped down from the building and kicked in a window to break inside. She cut past the stunned, silent residents, passing through the room to leap out the window on the other side and slip between the rainbows that arced toward her.

Frederica had witnessed Rain Pow's attacks a number of times

now, and she was gradually starting to figure out how she operated. She manifested rainbows, sending them running through the sky with speed and force. Since their use as weapons necessitated a time lag, Rain Pow couldn't generate them for instant attacks, and that meant Frederica could evade them. The problem was that there were just so many of them, and since they came at her from every direction, it was quite the task just to avoid all of them. On top of that was the additional burden of holding on to Weddin, which forced Frederica into a situation from which there would be no escape.

If all she had to do was flee, she could manage that. But there was no way she could attack. She'd be killed if she did. If she wanted to fight with Rain Pow, she would need Ripple-level projectiles. Frederica could only ever use one hand since she always had her crystal ball in the other—she wouldn't last even five seconds against Rain Pow.

"I'd like to ask you something, Weddin."

"Wh-what is it?"

"Which is your greater priority: saving your life or defeating the enemy?"

"The enemy," Weddin answered instantly.

This was the sort of answer Frederica liked to hear. Her cheeks relaxed into a smile. "In order to defeat her, I must lead you somewhere dangerous. Are you all right with that?"

"I am."

"In order to defeat her, you must trust me. You must surely hate me by now, don't you?"

"I hate you, but I'll trust you."

"How can you trust me? I'm not the sort of person you should trust. You're sure to suffer for it. I will not endorse that decision at all."

"You can't lie to me, right? You promised," Weddin replied, grinning boldly.

☆ Funny Trick (Time remaining: thirty-eight minutes)

For Funny Trick to activate her magic and move something, both objects had to be out of everyone's line of sight, even if only for the slightest instant.

She had to know the positions of both items to be exchanged beforehand. *I think it's there* or *it should be there* were not enough.

The range of her magic was about fifty yards. However, one of the items had to be close at hand, at a distance no greater than three feet.

Funny Trick had been watching the whole time. She wasn't allowed to blink.

She followed the sword fight between Kuru-Kuru Hime and Pukin with her eyes, waiting for her cue. Underneath her cape, she hid a smoke bomb she'd received from Mana. She just had to use this at the right time. This idea for using her magic, which 7753 had instructed her on, was frankly horrific, but after having seen the destroyed town, the dead people, and Pukin looking so gleeful about it, that horror had dissipated.

Kuru-Kuru Hime was being pushed back. She couldn't manage to counter any of Pukin's blows. Plus, she was bleeding. She was spewing blood, even though she hadn't taken a hit, and her ballerina costume was soiled red.

Both figures were moving so fast, it was the most Funny Trick could do just to keep up. She absolutely could not look away. Her eyes had to be fixed on Pukin's face.

Pukin said something to Kuru-Kuru Hime, and Kuru-Kuru Hime made her ribbons into a pointed shape and spun them. She carved at the ground, and right when Pukin attacked, she used that moment to fan hard at the ground she'd dug up. Funny Trick was watching Pukin's face. Pukin blinked reflexively to protect her eyes from the dust wafting up around her.

Now. The moment Pukin blinked, Funny Trick activated her magic.

She switched what was behind Pukin's eyelid with the smoke bomb in her hands.

Funny Trick flipped up her cape, and Pukin's eyeball rolled out from underneath it to the ground.

Pukin screamed and pressed her hand to her eye, and immediately, that spot on her face exploded. Smoke billowed up from her head. The white feather decoration fluttered down from Pukin's hair, blown in the wind, and fell away.

It was just a smoke bomb, but it packed enough punch to blow off your fingers. If you were to set it off in a person's eye socket… In other words, by the brain, it would be fatal, even for a magical

girl. Even for Pukin.

"We did it… We did it!" Funny Trick cried out in exultation, and Kuru-Kuru Hime fell with a *thump* onto her rear, her shoulders heaving.

Arms dangling loosely at her sides, Pukin fell to her right knee —then immediately stood up, thrusting forward with her sword.

Kuru-Kuru Hime hadn't been anticipating the attack. The rapier stabbed her in her undefended throat, and Funny Trick failed to dodge the dagger thrown at her, which ended up hitting her in the chest.

What happened? Blood—and something more important—was flowing out from where the dagger stuck in her. Pukin yanked her rapier out of Kuru-Kuru Hime's throat, showering herself with the splatter. That was when Funny Trick saw it—Pukin's face, the area around her right eye, was indeed blown away. It was completely gone.

—Why…? How…?!

Funny Trick grasped the dagger. The blood wouldn't stop. She tottered on unsteady legs and, unable to regain her lost balance, fell back onto the ground.

Was this it? Would it end like this? No. It wasn't over. Umi Shibahara would never give up. So then her partner never would, either. Clutching her chest, Funny Trick crawled along the ground.

☆ Rain Pow (Time remaining: thirty-seven minutes)

Carelessly, flippantly, Frederica dodged Rain Pow's attacks. Or rather than saying she dodged the rainbows, it was more like she was using the structure of buildings and the terrain to prevent Rain Pow from merging them together to make effective use of them, cutting off her waves of attacks. She was doing quite well, carrying around the burdensome Weddin. She was hardly recognizable from the last time they had fought—the presence of her crystal ball aside.

Rain Pow chased Frederica and attacked her. When she landed on the roof of a building, she found a grenade rolling toward her, pin out, and so she used a rainbow wall to shield herself, then sliced at the hand that manifested in the air to strike at her the moment the smoke grenade went off. These sorts of moves were what were keeping Rain Pow at a distance.

The two magical girls continued their chase from there to a department store, from the department store to the train station, darting past moving police cars and ambulances at a speed humans couldn't even perceive visually.

—*Two?*

At some point, Weddin had vanished. Had Frederica left her behind somewhere, judging her to simply be a burden? With Frederica's magic, she could send Weddin to escape someplace safe at any time. She was the type of person who would sacrifice Weddin to get away herself, but they had to have made some sort of contract on that point. It would have been too dangerous to make an ally of Frederica with no restrictions placed on her.

It was true that with Rain Pow's ears plugged, Weddin would be nothing but a burden. However, even unburdened, Frederica wasn't anything to worry about.

Rain Pow would press closer to her. She could do it slowly. Pukin's orders were absolute. She would lead Frederica somewhere she couldn't escape and then finish her off. Frederica went into the train station, jumping over the ticket gates, then slid through the train doors as they were closing.

Rain Pow didn't hesitate. She would do whatever it took to fulfill Pukin's orders. Following Frederica, she leaped into the train —and discovered it was a trap.

Weddin was on the train. Rain Pow had boarded an empty car, and Weddin alone was standing there imposingly, holding up a piece of paper about three feet wide. On it was written, *Stop moving! Don't hurt anyone!* in large writing, and once Rain Pow saw that, she obeyed Weddin's directions—her magic.

The train began to move. Rain Pow couldn't get out. Frederica was gone. She had been lured here. Frederica had sent Weddin somewhere to go set things up, following which she had come to wait in this train, and then Frederica had run into the car to lead Rain Pow to Weddin.

Weddin tossed aside the piece of paper to reveal another. It read, *Make it so you can hear and obey my orders*. Rain Pow couldn't oppose her. She dissipated the rainbows in her ears, and the sounds of the train resonated louder through her body.

"All right, so now you're absolutely forbidden to defy me. Release Tepsekemei from that ball, and come with me out of the—" Before Weddin could finish her order, she fell. The disembodied

hand that had tripped her vanished, and immediately, Weddin's body smacked into something invisible, sending her flying. The next instant, Rain Pow hit the invisible thing, too. The impact shot through her, all the way to the crown of her head, but she couldn't move, and she dropped the rainbow ball, then hit the invisible thing again. A heartbeat later, the rear door of the train approached them, and Rain Pow was unable to fulfill Pukin's orders.

☆ Pythie Frederica (Time remaining: thirty-five minutes)

Even from so far away, she could feel the rumbling and tremors coming to her through the ground. The empty can lying at her feet rattled and clattered. The train would have derailed around the point where it left the city limits, and it wasn't difficult to imagine just what sort of wreck it had turned into.

Someone was running to the station, yelling. Were they just a rubbernecker, or were they concerned about someone? *My*, Frederica thought, *such energy, despite everything that has happened today alone*.

Frederica got on top of the vending machine standing in the alleyway, and from there, she kicked off a window frame to climb up to the roof of the building. Black smoke was rising from the direction of the train station. All the dense clusters of rainbows around faded, then disappeared.

Weddin had ordered Frederica to prioritize eliminating the enemy, and as if clicking into place, that had switched away the promises worked into Frederica. She had obeyed Weddin's commands. The best way to defeat Rain Pow with certainty in such a situation had been for Weddin to sacrifice her life.

She'd lured Rain Pow into the narrow confines of the train car, where she'd had her confront Weddin. Frederica had instructed Weddin to flee the car quickly after that, but if Rain Pow were to chase after her, that would have pushed them further from the goal of defeating Rain Pow. So Frederica had made Weddin fall, and the train had left the city. Weddin and Rain Pow had been crushed in between the barrier and the train, and the train had gone off the rails.

Frederica had seen so many magical girls die out of this sort of sense of their own mission, that they had to do it, they had to carry

this out, no matter what, causing them to misjudge their own abilities.

This is why I said not to trust someone like me.

She had killed Rain Pow. Weddin, who had been her shackles, was dead, too. One more major task remained to Frederica. She couldn't flee the city until she got ahold of that.

"…Hmm?"

When she focused her eyes, she could see a faint figure flying through the air.

"Rather impressive to survive a thing like that," she said, somewhat astonished.

☆ 7753 (Time remaining: thirty-three minutes)

Pukin was missing her face. Gray smoke spewed off from where the chunk had been blasted out of it. Even a magical girl couldn't survive that. 7753 looked through her goggles at Pukin. There was something strange about her status. She was in an unusual state. Pukin had used her technique of deception on her own life.

There was a red line running across Pukin's face. She'd cut herself with her own sword to cast her magic on herself the instant before the smoke bomb had exploded. She'd made herself believe she had taken no damage.

Her brain had to have been damaged. There was no way she could do this by the power of belief alone… No, this wasn't just belief. In addition to the belief bestowed by her magic, Pukin's parameters displayed unusual values. She simply had too many heart marks on her vitality.

"This is getting rather amusing! Right?!" Pukin swung her rapier, and dots of blood flicked off it. Kuru-Kuru Hime lay on the ground, her hand pressed to her throat. Funny Trick had been hit in the chest. Both of them were gushing blood through their fingers. 7753's goggles indicated that both of them had been mortally wounded.

Even knowing it was useless, 7753 raised the staff that could shoot fire bullets and stepped forward. She wasn't all that afraid. She felt she had to take responsibility.

Of course she wouldn't be able to do that. She would be killed. But even so, she would fight until the end. Up until this point, she

had constantly kept herself frozen with ad hoc lies. She wanted to be a proper magical girl at the end, at least.

7753 was about to take one more step forward when she was hit from behind and thrown to the ground.

“Wh-what are you doing?!”

“You’re in my way. Run. Now.” Mana smacked 7753 aside with the end of her staff. “Don’t start thinking you can take responsibility by fighting and dying here. You do the most important job you can right now—get out of here, on your own. I’ll fight. This is for Hana.”

There were three syringes stuck in the back of Mana’s neck, already emptied. Mana stuck another three syringes in, then trembled, spasming. “Come get me, you fucking fencer!”

“Insolent cad.” Pukin acquiesced to Mana’s demand, about to step forward, but Mana made the rush first. Using her staff like a spear, she showered Pukin with stabs, taking Pukin by surprise. Pukin blocked with her rapier, no lesser in speed or strength. Rapier and twisted staff struggled for domination. Just how long would Mana’s doping last? Fifteen seconds, by the calculations 7753 read from her goggles. With that much time, 7753 might indeed be able to run. She understood that she couldn’t even afford to hesitate. She dashed off.

Martyring herself was a stupid idea. It seemed like a good one up until the moment Mana had smacked her aside. But Mana was right. Even if she did die, it wasn’t as if she would earn forgiveness from it.

7753 went to leap on Pukin’s left arm and held it down. Mana was putting everything she had into it, but that was just Pukin’s right arm vying against Mana’s whole body. So 7753 restrained Pukin’s left arm from its attempt to stab Mana in the side and was rewarded with her own arm getting slashed, blood spurting from it.

“I thought I told you to run! You’re naive if you think you can take responsibility with your death! I won’t let you do this!”

“I apologize! I’m sorry! You’re right that it’s naive to try taking responsibility through death! I’ll never consider something like it ever again! Never again, I swear!”

The slice on 7753’s arm ripped wider, spraying blood. She wasn’t strong enough to resist Pukin.

“Then run! You idiot! Dumbass! Stupid! The hell are you doing?! Come on!”

“I’m taking responsibility! We just have to beat her, right?!”

Pukin strained harder. She was trying to get out of 7753’s armlock. 7753 looked up at the sky, and spitting, she yelled, “Now!”

Faster than the spittle sprayed from 7753’s mouth fell, Kuru-Kuru Hime’s ribbon moved.

The light of Kuru-Kuru Hime’s life was starting to fade. She couldn’t have been able to twitch even a fingertip, never mind her arm. But she was still conscious. In the look she gave Pukin, you could see the roiling rage and resentment toward Pukin that simmered in her stomach, her grudge and tenacity holding her on the brink of death.

Kuru-Kuru Hime’s ribbons slithered along, reaching their maximum width of twenty inches to wrap around Pukin, who was locked in this pushing match. 7753 fell backward, pulling away, and at the same time, the ribbons limply fluttered down to the ground. From within the ribbons, a stone fell to the ground with a thump, rolled, hit the thick root of a tree, and stopped.

Kuru-Kuru Hime wasn’t the only one who had remained conscious. When Pukin was wrapped in ribbon and concealed from view, Funny Trick, who had been coming toward them at a crawl, leaving a trail of blood behind her, had used her magic on her.

Her doping worn off, Mana fell, and 7753 curled in on herself, holding her arm. She couldn’t believe she was still alive. Funny Trick and Kuru-Kuru Hime… The display in her goggles told her they were already dead. With that final move, with the most modest magics, they had overcome Pukin. Even with death before their eyes, fueled by pure determination, they had struggled, and even a master as great as Pukin had failed to finish them off. She had misjudged their lives’ strength, their spirits’ strength, the strength of their resentment toward the one who’d killed their parents, their friends.

7753 looked over at the pile of lumber leaking blood. This had really and truly been their final move.

They had left a rock inside that pile of lumber, about the size of a child’s head—just a very ordinary rock. There had been no magic cast on it. That was exactly why it had been able to touch the barrier. They had placed it on the boundary line of the barrier, half in, half out.

Kuru-Kuru Hime had hidden Pukin, while Funny Trick had

switched the positions of Pukin and the rock. Pukin had been transferred to the location of the barrier, and as for what had happened to her as a result—that was clear from the volume of blood that flowed out from within the pile of lumber.

This plan could only be executed if they locked Pukin in place. 7753 breathed a sigh, thinking, *I suppose I was a little useful*. She grimaced from the pain in her arm and was about to stand up when the lumber tumbled down.

An arm stretched out from within the toppled pile of wood, and then something crawled out, dragging itself. 7753, who had been trying to get to her feet, fell again, landing on her rear.

"My, my… What a foolish little trick you've pulled."

Pukin's face was gone. Her whole body was dyed crimson with her own blood, and she was covered in wood chips. Only her upper body moved along, dragging, sliding, sloshing along the ground, while her lower body remained on the other side of the barrier. She had been cut clean in half. Pukin crawled out, unconcerned about the innards that trailed behind her. Even with her body in this state, she kept a firm grip on the rapier in her right hand, pointing it at 7753. Just how could Pukin be enjoying this? She was smiling.

"So you're the last one, eh? So be it. We shall finish you off now." With her one remaining eye, she glared at 7753, frozen in place. Her determination and will to fight had evaporated, and all that remained in her heart now was terror. She looked up at the sky.

"Ah…"

Tepsekemei was coming toward them. She'd thinned out her body in order to speed up, making her literally faster than the wind. But even so, she would not make it in time to prevent Pukin, who teetered on the brink of death, from swiping her sword one last time.

However, the moment Pukin was about to stab 7753 in the face with her rapier, suddenly, a hand appeared in empty space and made a fist to smack down on Pukin's wrist from above. There was the crack of bones breaking, and Pukin dropped her rapier. Without missing a beat, she reached out for it again in an underhanded grip, but before she could, the hand picked up the rapier and disappeared. Pukin's left hand cut through air and Tepsekemei floated down. Pukin was immobile. Tepsekemei's form slithered into the great hole opened in Pukin's face. Pukin's expression

stiffened, and after not even a second, her body ruptured from the inside. Her clothes were turned to scraps, her ruff flew into the bushes, and her organs decorated every inch of their surroundings.

Amid the rain of blood, 7753 thought, *I have to thank her, at least*. She looked up at Tepsekemei to see her crying. Her lips were in a tiny pout, and tears fell from her eyes that seemed to say she didn't enjoy crying.

"Um… What about Rain Pow?"

"She's dead. And Weddin is dead, too. Everyone's dead."

Everyone was dead. Rain Pow and Weddin and Kuru-Kuru Hime and Funny Trick. Pukin's and Rain Pow's deaths would have been communicated to her boss, who may have still been in that meeting. So now there was no longer any reason for the Department of Diplomacy to bring out that weapon of mass destruction.

Was this for the best? Was this really how things should end?

"Is Mei smiling now?"

"No… You're crying."

"Mei can cry without practicing. Why's that?"

"I wonder…"

EPILOGUE

A cold wind blew through the courtyard as soon as she entered it. Looking up, she saw the gray sky stretch on and on. It would be cold even with leggings, never mind hose. In this season, a merry Christmas was close at hand, and in a few more sleeps, it would be New Year's. She thought having tea out in the courtyard on a day like this was rather stupid but couldn't say it out loud. At the very least, not in this household.

Mamori Totoyama slipped through the complex courtyard without losing her way. It was a strange thing, to call a courtyard complex, but the courtyard of this estate really was horribly complex. The manager had abdicated responsibility for the garden, and the daughter, who had taken over in his place, planted whatever trees she liked and pruned them into whatever shapes she wanted—thus the result was chaos. A large stuffed bear stood upright with its arms spread, a giant chess pawn blocked the path, an open book laid there so conspicuously, and the Winged Victory of Samothrace loomed headlessly over them. Once Mamori had made it through this maze of shrubs, with its lack of all consistency but "to the miss's taste," she came to a little round white table.

There, the master of this courtyard—Kanoe Hitokouji—was operating a panel connected to a magical phone. "You're late, Mamori."

"I did, in fact, come as fast as I could."

Mamori set down the plate, black tea, and snacks beside the panel in that order and, once Kanoe indicated she had permission, took the seat opposite her. The rattan chair, worth as much as a full year's worth of Mamori's allowance, had been left underneath the cold sky and mercilessly chilled her rear.

Kanoe picked up the cup and took a sip, and then, without a word, slid a manila envelope across the table toward her.

"What's this?"

“Your reward. It was quite a while ago, but you did some work for me. A few related projects have reached a certain stage of completion.”

“*Did* I do something?”

At a rate that went from once every few days to a few times every day, Mamori was forced into various labors. She was made to participate in mischief, made the target of mischief, worked like a dog, blatantly lied to, deceived, and made to carry the young miss’s favorite black tea out to the stupidly cold courtyard, but she’d never received a reward for any of it. Kanoe would say, “It would be incredibly boorish to give cash as thanks for your goodwill.” Mamori didn’t give a damn if it was boorish, but loudly arguing as much had incurred wrath from the Hitokouji family authorities.

“I thought you would never give me cash for my goodwill, miss.”

“I see, so your usual activities are indeed out of goodwill?”

“I’m sure in your mind, all of it is, miss.”

Though there was no way Kanoe would not have noticed her sarcasm, Kanoe smiled as if she didn’t. “This reward isn’t from myself. It’s official compensation from the Magical Kingdom.”

“Does the Magical Kingdom pay money?”

“To be precise, I am giving you a portion for your labor from the salary I receive from them.”

From the way Kanoe had emphasized the word “I” twice, she may have intended to make Mamori feel obligated. Simply living with the Hitokouji family in their service as her parents did, Mamori was already inescapably obligated, so she felt it was kind of crazy she would have more unnecessary obligation pushed on her. There were some people in the world who, if you were indebted to them, would turn it into something that could never be undone. She didn’t even have to think about it to know what sort of person Kanoe was.

Mamori took the envelope Kanoe’d given her in hand and opened the mouth of it, confirming its contents with narrowed eyes. “…Forty thousand?”

“No, it’s forty-five thousand yen.”

I think I’m okay with this, she found herself thinking, possibly a result of feeling frozen up. “By the way, about that conversation. What kind of work did I do, again? I’m scared to take money without knowing what I did.”

“You modified those goggles for me, didn’t you?”

“Oh…that? That was a while back, wasn’t it?”

The transmission function was one thing, but Mamori had detected the stench of criminality in both the log-erasure function and the transmission function that interfered with magical-phone reception. She recalled she’d been uneasy and wondered just what Kanoe meant to do with it.

“Your magic has grown, Mamori. It’s helped me make progress in various respects.”

“You won’t use that for anything bad, right?”

“Just what do you take me for?”

“I’m concerned *because* this is you, miss.”

“Why would you believe a good magical girl like myself would do something bad? Oh, these macaroons are rather good. You have some, too, Mamori.”

Mamori ate one of these recommended macaroons in one bite. It was grating that it did taste good. “What are you reading, miss?”

“A report from a subordinate.”

“That reminds me—you were promoted again last month, right? So is this a new subordinate?”

“No, this is a report regarding a prior subordinate. She was working under my direct supervision.”

“Huh.”

“I had to do some restructuring. She helped me with that.”

“Even the Magical Kingdom does that sort of thing, huh? It’s a rough world out there.”

“It definitely involved some cuts to our staff, but there was no reduction in the organization in the operational sense. It was a restructuring in the original sense of the word. She was very useful to the Magical Girl Resources Department in the past, but once I took over, her role became unnecessary. A fairy exiting across a rainbow… Isn’t that poetic?”

“Is it?”

“All of a sudden there’s so much more to be done. It’s quite the struggle.”

“You don’t seem like you’re having a hard time at all.”

“But I am. In my current position, I must handle the balance of power between departments quite delicately.”

“Oh, really?”

“For example, there’s the Department of Diplomacy. Why must

they be so rough? I don't know if it's tradition or what, but I really must have them stop rather soon with these old-fashioned techniques of sending in a violence specialist to put pressure on other departments."

"Right."

"Although recently it seems the tables have turned, what with that ace the Inspection Department's criminal investigations managed to muscle in… The diplomacy team shouldn't have been thinking about trying to get a hold on the other departments' weak points. They even put up a giant barrier in order to capture the culprit alive, and what great losses we all suffered for it! I'm told they were manipulated by fake intel an informant leaked to them. What foolishness. Well, I'm sure things will be quiet with them for a time."

"I see."

"Oh, yes, and speaking of incidents, there was also that major prison break. That's led to a certain department being exposed for the vile deed of using convicts for their dirty work."

"Wooow."

"That was also, in fact, a department that's been antagonistic toward us at Magical Girl Resources. So a lot of things have gotten easier, as a result."

"That sounds good— What happened to the escaped convicts, though? They were serious criminals, weren't they?"

"The Inspection Department's inspection team dealt with two of the three without incident. That is to say, they killed them. They were unable to simply detain the criminals, but it seems the pair were incredibly notorious villains of historical fame, so I would say the inspection team did a fine job there. It seems their team chief is soon to be publicly commended for it."

"And the other one?"

"It seems the last one managed to escape. Though, well, I hear she was the least significant of the three."

"Oh, really?" Did Kanoe realize that Mamori's replies were deliberately monotone?

"Mamori, you're not listening to me, are you?" Apparently she did.

"You're speaking in such vague terms, miss, I have no idea what you're talking about. It's basically going in one ear and out the other, and none of it is staying in my head."

“I know that. I’m telling you precisely because you’re like that.”

“Why bother?”

“I couldn’t talk about this to someone who understands what I’m saying and will remember it, can I, now?”

“Please do talk about this to someone who will understand what you’re saying and will remember it.”

“I do hope the day comes when I can talk to someone like that. Once the Magical Kingdom becomes a bit more decent, and once I get into the position where I can enact reforms, and once magical girls are more than just people to be used.”

Mamori was about to say, *“This talk again?”* But when she saw the look on Kanoe’s face, she closed her mouth. Her expression was serious, not teasing—a look Kanoe rarely showed on her face.

“…What is it?”

“Oh, nothing.” Kanoe shook her head, and she was her usual detached self again. “Of course, I haven’t been sitting here waiting for a windfall. I position myself where it seems things will work, then I work things moderately, I tamper, I connect, I galvanize, I urge into action by deliberately attempting to prevent, and I adjust things well for good results. And even after accomplishing my goals, I don’t let go, making sure to deal with the aftermath…”

A water droplet bounced off the round table with a *plop*. Raindrops hit her nose, her hands.

“Agh, geez. Let’s go inside now. We’ll catch cold if we get rained on in this chill,” Mamori said.

“Right then, let’s go in, meow.”

“Why do you have to end your sentences with that? It’s creepy.”

“Creepy! That’s a fine thing to say. I think it’s cute.”

◇

The floor was concrete, and water damage stains marked the ceiling. The ceiling would drip during heavy rain, making the room damp, even on sunny days. You couldn’t really call it an environment appropriate for a wounded person, but being a fugitive, she was in no position to ask for luxuries.

The room was stark, and the furnishings could be counted on your fingers: a bed, desk, blinds, sink, bookshelf, and the residents. The rusted steel desk stood in the center of the room, and opening

the largest drawer revealed lines of little bottles. Inside them were packed colorful powders.

She pulled an old scale from the second drawer down, a smaller one, and put it on top of the desk. Grasping tiny weights with tweezers, she placed them on one side, and next, she poured medicine from one of the little bottles out on the other, adjusting the scale until it was even. She checked the scale, then poured the powder into a mortar and pestle. She repeated the process a few more times.

From the third drawer down, she pulled out a plastic bottle with no label and poured the translucent fluid within it into the mortar. Slowly, taking care not to spill, she ground and ground the contents of the mortar with the pestle until she felt no more friction from the rough powder.

After about an hour, a thick liquid medicine that shone metallic green was ready.

“Come on, it’s time for your medicine,” she sweetly addressed the girl who lay on the bed.

The girl shook her head, her expression unmoving. “I hate medicine.”

“Now, now, don’t act so stubborn. This is for your health.” Frederica narrowed her eyes and sat down on the bed.

The girl was covered in bandages. Frederica moved them aside to check the girl’s wounds and smiled, seeing that she was doing better than the day before. Even if this place was unsanitary and she lacked proper medical facilities, magical girls were strong and tenacious. They were made that way.

The one flaw of this deluxe medicine Frederica made was that it was, by nature, difficult to swallow. So Frederica dipped a dropper into the mortar to suck up some medicine, then pushed the girl’s jaw up and hung the dropper over it to stick it into her mouth. She administered it slowly, drop by drop, so that it wouldn’t get stuck in her throat. Once she was done with the first day’s amount, she continued over a second and third day until the contents of the mortar were gone. The girl was so cute with her mouth open like a baby bird waiting to be fed.

“You may close your mouth now.”

“Yes, master.”

Frederica lifted the girl’s torso, threaded her fingers through her hair, and combed through it. Her long black hair was glossy and

smooth. It felt so good sliding between her fingers, and it reflected the glow of the fluorescent lights so beautifully.

As she ran her right hand through the girl's hair, with her left, she stroked the girl's left eye.

"That tickles."

"Of course it does. I'm doing it to tickle you."

The girl's left eye was closed by a large, deep sword scar, and her left arm was missing below the elbow. Those parts weren't going to be healed by Frederica's special medicine.

Well, that's fine.

With her two-hundred-and-fifty-sixth-note handkerchief, Frederica wiped the medicine off the girl's lips for her.

The girl—Ripple—was lucky. Her opponent's magic hadn't intended to kill from the get-go, and their attack hadn't been aiming for Ripple's vitals. When she'd lost consciousness and fallen into the hole, she'd returned to human form, so her collar had caught on a jutting spot on the wall of the hole partway down, and she'd been saved from falling to the bottom. What's more, Frederica, who had originally meant to flee right away, had turned her attention to watching how the battle would end instead and so had been able to retrieve Ripple quickly and give her emergency treatment.

She was lucky to be alive. Without any one of these factors, Ripple would have died.

Frederica had taken Ripple, hovering between life and death, to the local hospital, saying she was another casualty. She'd then acquired Pukin's sword and used it on Ripple, to make her believe she had incredible vitality and recovery ability in order to call her back from death's door, and then had spirited her away with her crystal ball. Ripple had been under Frederica's care ever since.

Ripple had grown immensely since the last time they had met, quite some time ago. Frederica assumed Ripple had less potential than Snow White, but she exceeded her expectations to become a fine magical girl who would make anyone proud. She was surely something close to Frederica's ideal.

Frederica had obtained the sword she'd stolen from Pukin, and she'd obtained Ripple, unconscious. Combine those two things, and she could create her ideal magical girl.

Frederica smiled at her. “Your wounds have largely closed. Come tomorrow, you’ll be able to get out of bed.”

“Really? I’m so glad.” Her expression didn’t change, and her voice was monotonous, too. Frederica was using another magical girl’s tool, so perhaps she’d adjusted it poorly. It seemed Ripple wasn’t lying about being glad, though, and it was cute, for what it was.

“You’ll be doing a little studying to become a magical girl.”

“What’s a magical girl?”

“Oh, well… It’s someone like me, I suppose.”

“Can I become like you, master? I’d be so glad.”

“And I’m glad you would say that. Let’s work together to make you the ideal magical girl.”

Afterword

This is Endou; it's been a month since the last time. I've come to bring you the second part of *Limited*. Among all the magical girls who have appeared so far, the tenth fastest to run a hundred-meter race without magic is Captain Grace.

This *Magical Girl Raising Project* is called *Limited*. If you look up the word in the dictionary, you get definitions like "finite" or "restricted." So this is a story with limits. Time is limited, the location is limited, their fighting forces are limited, Ripple's clothing is limited—among many other things, such as the acts and depictions in the book, like "This is a bit much…," or "Please word this a little more gently," or "No phone chat dating services in this story."

The following is a conversation I had with my editor, S-mura-san.

"I'll send it to you once I'm done writing."

"Roger. I'll be waiting."

"There's no specific deadline, right? Just, like, the sooner, the better?"

"That's right. As soon as possible."

"Because there's not much time left, right?"

"Do your best."

"So it's *limited* even for the author, huh?"

""Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!""

It was a dry laugh. Things dry out a lot in the winter, which is tough. I feel like S-mura-san's laugh is dry even in the summer, though, but I don't really remember.

There was one limitation lifted, in that not only magical girls but a mage joined the fight. So I have good news for all those who mourn, "There's no mascot character for me… I can't become a

magical girl!" If you can just become a mage, you might be able to join in on a killing match between a bunch of lovely magical girls. As for how to become a mage, please search for that on your own.

Oh, and I suppose there was also the time I heard my nephew (age three) wail that the number of his *monaka* snacks was limited, and that other time my friend I-kun wore down his body, soul, and time over *Monster Hunter* to the point where he became limited on time for other things, but that's about all, I guess. As for Ripple's left arm, which for some reason was *not* limited in the previous volume, forgive me for that. They intend to correct it in the reprint… Or I hope they do. Anyway, thank you for reading this variously limited *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

I've restrained myself from making jokes about the number of books printed being limited. Is this what they call being socially appropriate? Since I have a reputation for being reminded to not have an antisocial kind of afterword, I must praise myself for my growth.

To everyone in the editing department who has shown me guidance, and in particular to my editor, S-mura-san: Thank you very much. S-mura-san's sleeping hours were the most limited thing of all.

Marui-no-sensei, thank you very much. When I asked for a school-uniform motif and you responded with a boy's school uniform, I cried tears of joy and thought, *Ahh, I'm so glad this guy's doing the illustrations!* My favorite picture in this book is Sonia in gleeful pursuit.

And to all my readers: Thank you very much for buying this book. Let's meet again in a new *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

I like nurses' outfits quite a lot, but I'm also pretty fond of stand-up collars. 7753 was supposed to have a school-uniform motif, so I threw one in. Thank you very much!!!!

Mei is...strong...

Marui-no

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